Corina SESERMAN

YOUTH AND THE DIGITAL ERA

How does Gender Identity Influence Social Media Content Production?

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To my mother, Oltița, and to my fiancé, Bogdan,
for their love, unwavering trust and support.

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Preface

With the rapid and constant evolution and innovation of technology the access to the Web and its usage has become more and more widespread. This evolution has impacted current society in every facet and level, from the economy works to the way social structures are formed and the way social interactions take place. The Web offers individuals various tools through which they can express themselves and transmit essential messages to others about who they are, what type of activities they engage in, where they went on vacation and other important live events. This modern avenue through which individuals perfume their expression of the self has mostly been made possible through implementation of social networking sites (SNSs). The way SNSs or social media platforms function have also undergone their own process of evolution and development and with these changes there has been a profonde impact especially on the youth and the ways they navigate, construct and perform their identities.

The following book provides an exploration on the intricate and complex processes that the youth employ in their construction of their digital identities, the tools they use to carefully curate their online image and the performance methods they adopt in order to manage their audiences. With this in mind it is important to highlight that the sample for this study were teenagers in high school with the ages between 15 and 19 years old. The sample was collected from the North-East region of Romania. This research was particularly interested in observing their behavior and performance on social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. The reasoning behind choosing these to SNSs specifically was due to the results collected in the first stage of the data collection process which highlighted that these two platforms were the ones most used by the sample in their digital identity development. This book was mainly motivated by the desire to understand how the digital environment shapes, influences, and sometimes even constrains the process of identity formation and expression of young people during a paramount period of their development.

A key element that has a great impact on how teenagers form their identities and the manner in which they choose to portray them is gender. The primary objective of this research is to offer a detailed exploration of the impact gender has on the manner in which the youth present themselves in online spaces such as Instagram and Facebook through the use of mediated and visual tools. In order to succeed in reaching this goal both qualitative and quantitative methodologies were used. This approach was necessary in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the ways gender identity influences adolescents to curate their online personas, engage with peers, and navigate the complexities of self-presentation in an increasingly digital world. As a theoretical framework for this study Goffman's dramaturgy theory was employed. The first stage of the research was defined by its quantitative phase which employed a questionnaire to gather data in order to provide a broader view on social media trends regarding its usage in the youth community. In the qualitative phase of this research two research tools were applied to provide a nuanced exploration of the teenagers' personal experiences and perspectives in regard to gender identity and the digital space. Through the use of focus groups and photography analysis rich narratives, detailed insights into how social media platforms are used to experiment with different aspects of gender identity were collected.

This book is intended for a wide audience, including sociologists, educators, psychologists, parents and anyone interested in the intersection of youth, gender identity, and digital media. It aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by offering both theoretical and methodological insights into how social media influences gender identity presentation and development. Furthermore, it seeks to inform educators and policymakers about the potential implications of social media on adolescent well-being and development.

This book does not claim to provide definitive answers but rather aims to open up new directions for discussion and further research. The rapidly changing landscape of social media means that our understanding of its impact on youth gender identity will continually evolve as well. As such, this work is a starting point for ongoing inquiry into how future technological advancements will shape the performance of gender identities of young people.

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Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iaşi

Introduction

In her 1950 book called *Male and Female,* anthropologist Margaret Mead states that '[h]uman beings have learned laboriously to be human' that they have 'kept their social inventions through thousands of small vicissitudes' (Mead, 1950:185). Although Mead uses this argument to explore the evolution of family and the gender roles found within, it does not extract it of its value in the current context of inquiry. Through the constant rules and ideologies that have been created and implemented in human societies throughout history, it can be noticed that these ideas and aspects have shaped social life and the manner in which people could interact and present themselves based on social criteria, such as race, nationality, social class, gender and so on. These social criteria help the individuals determine how they should act when interacting with a person or a group who has a different social and cultural background than they do or a similar one. These aspects are especially evident when conducting research on gender and the way gender norms have been uploaded into the digital space.

The complex and intricate aspects that are related to the way individuals behave in the online environment and the multitude of opportunities and risks that can occur have been a hot topic in the last few years. This has been mostly due to the forced digitalization that was incentivised by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic that started in 2019. The population that greatly stimulated the interest of digital social researchers is that of children and adolescents, due to the fact that being born and raised with these technologies raised several curiosities in regards to their behaviour, online and offline, that was easily highlighted during the pandemic. One of these researches is done by Bengtsson et al. (2021) who argues that although young people's lives during the pandemic have fundamentally changed as schools 'sports centers, libraries, recreation facilities and nightlife closed, reshaping the social processes and relationships in which young people's everyday lives had been embedded' and as they had been physically restricted due to the quarantine, unlike previous generations, their free time and social activities are not limited nor bound to the physical realm

(Bengtsson et al., 2021:66). Their space for being and interacting extends to the virtual environment, which becomes an essential characteristic of young people's everyday life, as technologies have become artifacts that intertwine with their practices, social arrangements and forms of organisation. Bengtsson et al. (2021) also argues that the online setting allowed a more relaxing way in applying the research methods for data collection as the interview setting allowed the teenagers to discuss, reflect on and compare their online practises between the quarantine and the normal context.

Another research which captures these changes is done by Hamilton et al. (2019) who postulates that during this time teenagers connected with their peers through a variety of social media platforms and, as a result, the usual aspects of performance of identity, as well as the social norms that dictate gendered behaviour have transferred in the digital space. Teenagers' online activities can be, but not limited to, browsing their Instagram feed to see what their friends are posting or what is new within their circles, look at their stories, comment on others' posts, share memes, Direct Message or video call each other, play online games with each other. These are all settings of online identity performance and interaction where individuals take their place on the front stage and form their role that is in line with social criteria such as gender and act them out accordingly. Through video chatting, teenagers can apply the same techniques for performing that they use in the physical realm, as they shorten the barrier between the performer and their audience, creating a more defined context. The online space during the pandemic also provided teens with a form of escapism from the view of their parents or other family members. Being constantly locked in with your immediate family and having limited options for exploration and creativity within the offline area, the online world attracts, as it offers plenty of space in which teenagers can develop their identities and explore the multitude sides of the internet. This space gives them the autonomy that is sought after at this stage of development, but during which there is also an inclination towards risk taking. This type of behaviour is 'a normative part of adolescence (Steinberg, 2004), partially due to teens' "personal fable" mindset: believing oneself to be uniquely invulnerable to risks (i.e., "this won't happen to me") (Buis & Thompson, 1989)' (Hamilton et al., 2020:8). This might lead to online behaviour that leaves the content creator in a predicament or to deal with an injured online reputation. These

risks are usually the type which are accepted by the peer group as deviating from the set norm could lead to social exclusion.

Similarly, González-Padilla and Tortolero-Blanco (2020) view that social media holds a considerable amount of both advantages and disadvantages and they state that there is need for a certain feeling of responsibility when using its tools, as these provide the means for information to travel in real time, sharing articles and posts and being in contact with any individual from any part of the world. Still, researchers call to attention the need for precaution in the online realm as within current times the 'dissemination of fake data, myths, and pessimist information that combined with quarantine states may lead to anxiety, depression and in some extreme cases, the suicide' (González-Padilla and Tortolero-Blanco, 2020:8). These aspects can also affect gender identity performances as the deviation from the normative setting can lead to extreme backlash from the audience. The social actor adapts through impression management the type of artifices they use and the type of behaviour and speech they adopt. The youth of today is part of the digital native generations in which they were born and grew up with the developing digital environment. Digital natives are seen as the generation that is Internet and tech savvy, that use the smart technologies on a daily basis and have integrated them in every aspect of their life (Kim, 2021). Even so, according to Kirschner & Bruyckere (2017), the term digital native can be misleading as it takes away the focus from helping children develop digital skills in order to increase digital literacy, as it assumes that they already hold all the knowledge. This assumption, as shown in the EU Kids Online project, as well as the EU Commission's network Better Internet for Kids, is not valid. In the report made by EU Kids Online (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Olafsson, 2011) it is stated that the myth that children are more knowledgeable than their parents is at times exaggerated and that it obscures them from receiving the education and support they need.

The European Commission has set out a project called Europe's Digital Decade in which they seek 'a human-centric, sustainable vision for digital society throughout the digital decade to empower citizens and businesses' (European Commission, 2021). This goal extends in relation to children and the youth as well. Creating the Better Internet for Kids portal has provided the platform in which the two key networks that fight to help kids be safe online reside. The two networks InSafe and INHOPE deal with trying to keep children safe while they are online, helping them through their emotional issues that can be caused by their online experiences and reporting

and dealing with illegal content in which minors are depicted. The European Digital agenda is set on having every European be a digital citizen. Children and young people are seen especially as having particular needs as well as vulnerabilities concerning the internet. The digital environment is still seen as a place filled with opportunities. The internet provides children and teenagers with the possibility to 'access knowledge, to communicate, to develop their skills and to improve their job perspectives and employability' (Better Internet for Kids, 2022). The strategy proposes that member states take appropriate action in regards to children's access to the internet as well as their safe navigation of it. In order to see the opinion of children and the youth concerning the topic of digitalization and the impact it has on their lives, they conducted focus groups in the majority of member states. Their main research question is related to the overall aims of the EU's project Europe's Digital Decade, and what they sought to find out is how can they make this digital decade be fit for children. One aspect that they highlight is that researchers should be more inclined in investigating young people's experiences and process as this 'will help them to identify the key risks and challenges at stake, but also to bring a more innovative perspective to online opportunities and benefits for society as a whole' (Better Internet for Kids, 2021). Studying online gender behaviour also provides extensive data in relation to children and young people's experience that can help the overall perception of these developments within the current socio- cultural context and with the creation of appropriate policies and curricula.

The importance of the online was also shown by the Committee on the Rights of the Child as they published in 2021 General commentary 25 'on children's rights in relation to the digital environment' (OHCHR, 2021). These were created in order to ensure the wellbeing and the safety of children and young people's rights in the digital environment. This shows that this space does have a direct impact on people and that, similarly to the physical environment, it needs to be studied and researched. The General Comment developed from the submissions from 142 states which adopted it, Romania being one of them, and from a sample of 709 children, from 28 of the countries, were interviewed and consulted on this manner. The 25th General Comment begins by stating that the children who were consulted stated 'that digital technologies were vital to their current lives and to their future' and they provide a series of transcript quotes from their consultations, which they argued that it is: ' "By the means of digital technology, we can get information from all around the world"; "[Digital technology]

introduced me to major aspects of how I identify myself"; "When you are sad, the Internet can help you [to] see something that brings you joy"' (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021:1). This statement shows that digital technologies play a paramount role in the lives of children and to their processes of identity development. It also highlights the fact that at times the amount of information and potential risk the internet offers can be overwhelming for them, especially as the digital space and the technologies associated with it are evolving constantly. There are five rights that have been published, such as the right to access information, the right to freedom of expression, the right to privacy, the right to freedom of association and peaceful assembly, the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion and right to birth registration and right to identity. This document also touches on the concerns regarding gender identity and the gender divide as it sets out to 'take proactive measures to prevent discrimination on the basis of sex' and '[s]pecific measures will be required to close the gender-related digital divide for girls and to ensure that particular attention is given to access, digital literacy, privacy and online safety' (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021:2). This shows that gender related issues and digital practices in relation to children and the youth has become an international subject of interest.

Research questions

Through these current discussions and policy making, it has become apparent that not only is the digital space an increasingly paramount field of both adults' and children's lives, but also a support for overall society and their attributed bodies of power and institutions in times of crisis and of increasing development. With these aspects in mind this book focuses on the strong correlation between online content production and gender identity, aiming to further the understanding on how these elements work together and how they affect the individual as a result. The subject of this research takes on a unique point of observation, which brings new data and a different perspective to the existing academic work. This research looks at gender from both male and female perspectives regarding their complex experiences and how gender coins their decision making process when they develop and post digital content on their social platforms. This is due to the point of interest on how and why people choose to stick or reject traditional gender roles and on how one's gender identity affects the end result of content production. Because of their ubiquitous quality, digital devices provide the users with the possibility of constantly existing both in the digital and the physical space which also encourages them to work on their performance and presentation of the self with great care within these spaces. One's relationships, whether they are personal or professional, 'may be at least partly developed and maintained using social media such as LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter' due to the fact that the visual media one used to create about their lives have now become digitised (Lupton, 2015:1). There is little overestimation over the impact digital technology had and still has on the individuals lives and the manner in which they conduct and create their identities. As children and the youth are the ones to adopt these technologies the fastest and as gender norms impact their socialisation process and the way they view themselves and interpret the world around them, then it can be considered appropriate to focus on this population to try and uncover the impact gender identity has on digital content

production. These aspects are what led to the main research question of this book, which is:

How does gender identity influence digital content production?

The overall process of this research did not prove to be linear as it required several methodological changes as well as constant revisiting and re-evaluation of the data collection and data analysis process. The theoretical framework was established early in the study and it remained the same, only certain data collection tools and the analysis strategies underwent changes in order to complement the initial findings. With each new data collection stage, the next strategy encountered the appropriate alterations necessary to answer the main and the additional research questions. The empirical data also took several preliminary analysis phases. In the focus group stage of the research some of the questions that were asked were directly related to the way the conversation between the participants developed. Although seemingly unrelated to the main subject they provided relevant contributions to the data as they provide pertinent views on the interactions between genders as well as their views of each other's comments. This research sees social media platforms as an additional front stage setting and users act in a similar way in which they do in the offline social interactions. There are key differences in these two realms which are further explored and discussed in the following chapters. These sites also create an environment in which they can cause misuse and therefore end up 'causing homogeneity on the network, causing social problems, and huge confusion if linked to collective dramatization' (Kim, 2021:2). Kim (2021) refers to the fact that networks that manage to make their users feel like they truly exist with them have achieved a homogeneous quality. This quality also entails that it has managed to successfully integrate the political and the social homogeneity. Meaning that integrating ideology homogeneity into the platform makes the users feel that they are in line with it. Homogeneity in social media platforms also refers to the social criteria, such as social class, age, race, gender and so on, that users connect with at a social and psychological level. In this sense the youth look for environments that reflect their offline reality. These aspects make way for the remainder of the research questions of this book:

What are the motivators for teenagers to engage in online activity? How do teenagers feel about new media regarding representation?

What social media platforms do they use and how much time do they spend on them? What gender differences can be observed in regards to new media consumption?

What difference can be observed in online activity behaviours between males and females?

How do they feel about their gender identity when it comes to fitting in with their peer group?

These questions are further explored in the *Methodology Considerations* chapter, as well as in the *Data Analysis* chapters. Youth experience various challenges when communicating through social media, be it through direct interaction with other users or through the constant posting of digital content. This is mostly due to the belief that this innovation 'complicates our metaphors of space and place, including the belief that audiences are separate from each other' (Marwick and boyd, 2010:115), while capturing the individual 'from a world of relatively transparent audiences to that of far less transparent "networked publics" (boyd 2011)' (Szabla & Blommaert, 2018:2).

Structure of the book

The following book consists of seven chapters. The first chapter is the introduction, which focuses on briefly presenting the overall subject of inquiry and the motivation for this research. As the body becomes more and more akin to that of the *cyborg*, decorated with wearable and mobile technologies throughout the day and night, wearing them to bed to monitor one's sleep or to wake them up, self-tracking and biometrics push sociological thought in further audit of the way these technologies impact individuals and social interactions (Lupton, 2015). Wearing various technologies and using them to communicate and present oneself has become a habituated act which changed the way society functions. These aspects, as mentioned, are also apparent in gendered performances as these technologies function as artefacts in individuals' depictions of self.

The second chapter is the Literature Review chapter that provides an extensive presentation and review of the existing theories and research. This is done in order to be able to construct a balanced and fitting theoretical framework, conceptual context and methodological considerations for the subject of study. In this chapter there are three main concepts explored which helped define this research, presented in three main sections with their attributed subsections which take an in depth look at gender identity development and gender theories, mass media's impact on social thought and youth identity development in the context of the digital age.

The third chapter focuses on the methodology of this book which presents the research methods and tools used for empirical data collection and the ways in which the data is analysed.

The details of the field work, research design, ethical considerations, sampling strategies are also included here.

The fourth, the fifth and the sixth chapters are the empirical data chapters of this book. As it is presented, each methodological tool that was used in the research process received its allocated chapter to be able to fully explore the findings. Lastly the final chapter of this book is focusing on discussing these findings and interpretations of the data as well as the final conclusion of this research.

Chapter 1

Literature Review

1.1. Exploring the Concept of Gender

Within this chapter, the existing academic literature, research and epistemological considerations regarding the key concepts that are perpetually present throughout this book are extensively explored. The current chapter is split in three sections related to the main concepts that guide the empirical research methodology. Each section focuses on offering critical background and a comprehensive literature review of the main areas of inquiry. The goal of this chapter is to set the groundwork for the following research project and to place it in the existing research and literature related to it. The first concept that is discussed is gender which is a topic that faces a great deal of prejudices and myths, and due to this, it asks for a detailed analysis and discussion. In the collective conscience still lies plenty of misguided information regarding gender and the people associated with diverse gender categories. This term is handled and comprehended in this book as the arrangement of 'those aspects of male and female roles, behaviours and preferences that were socially constructed rather than a function of biology' (Cislaghi & Heise, 2019:4). Social scientists follow this thread of thought as it gives the researcher the ability to counterargument the cohesive myth that females and males, due to the nature of their bodies, are completely different. Multiple theoretical perspectives have postulated that the definition which is accepted by both gender and feminist fields of study is 'that gender is best conceptualised as a social system that apportions resources, roles, power and entitlements according to whether a person or practice is perceived as male or female, masculine or feminine (Ridgeway and Correll 2004)' (Cislaghi & Heise, 2019:4). In other words, it can be argued that social norms amount to only a small fragment to what the overall gender system encompasses. This system is composed of multiple aspects that can comprise the roles which are assigned to individuals based on their gender, the process of socialisation individuals undergo during childhood and their youth, as well as

the power dynamics that occur in personal and professional relationships.

The first philosophical movement that explored in detail the 'distinctions of the sexes' was the Enlightenment, an era that brought us the first pieces of gender and feminist theory while attempting 'to understand the role of women in contemporary society' (O'Brien, 2005:3). People's views on masculinity, femininity and gender relations are often projected through a perspective limited by their local cultural beliefs, and because of that, at times, they end up residing ignorant of the complex and diverse gendered behaviours and identities that spread across cultures and history. The social sciences provide extensive research and theory on this subject. These are seen as vital tools that contribute to dissipating prejudices linked to one's sex and in understanding the real issues linked to it. This chapter explores these theoretical tools and the historical development of the knowledge regarding gender. Whenever one begins a research project within this area the first pertinent question to ask is *what is gender?* Historically, gender studies arose as a product of the women's movements that ignited major political and social change regarding women's rights and position within the social sphere at the beginning of the twentieth century. This new sociological branch of research was mainly focused on women's issues and struggles within the patriarchal system, therefore initially making it a study of women. Throughout the years the focus changed, and rather than simply studying only women, researchers began exploring all sides of the gender paradigm. In other words, now there is extensive research and public debate concerning masculinities. The academic discussions around the issues of 'fatherhood, men's movements, men's violence, boys' education, men's health and men's involvement' have become an intrinsic part of achieving gender equality (Connell, 2009:X). This makes it essential to analyse one's perception of their gender, in order to understand the various realities socially formed through one's biology. This book aims, not to simply focus on the inequalities that women still face, but rather on the whole spectrum regarding gender, meaning focusing on female and male perspectives, and highlight that the traditional gender binary boxing can be limiting on an individual's full potential.

Considering the contemporary context, an international approach regarding gender is pertinent. This is mostly due to 'the deepening of economic interdependence, the creation of global media, the interlinking of political systems, all of which are now called 'globalization', [events that have] powerful implications for

gender' (Connell, 2009:X). These innovative processes, contoured through the global market and the migration that followed it, through new media and international state structures, paved the way for gender orders to be created. For the first time, we have a space where new identities and movements meet and are being created, while the knowledge of their existence circulates globally. The arrangement of facts about politics and business, mass media, social class, families and growing up, launched the modern thought system of gender. These facts aid in forming an intrinsic pattern, that is part of the overall gender arrangement, present in the contemporary social structures. Although it has become a common use term, that at times is used interchangeably with the biological or assigned sex, gender encapsulates the whole social behavioral guidelines and roles within society attributed to one's biological construction. In other words, gender is viewed as a "system of social practices" whose main role is to create and maintain gender distinctions which are often used as a leeway in organising relations of inequality (Ridgeway and Smith- Lovin 1999:192). When looking at gender from this perspective one can observe that it is involved in the creation of both the distinctions and the inequalities. Sociologically speaking, gender is considered a social construct that assigns certain social roles and behaviours based on one's biological sex. It is a construct used to better contour gender relations which refer to 'societally patterned interactions between men and women in society' (Giddens A, 2009:1119). These types of claims led to some sociologists arguing the fact that a 'gender order exists in which expressions of masculinity and femininity are organised in a hierarchy that promotes the domination of men over women' (Giddens A, 2009:610). In a society where gender relations and gender order are deemed paramount for the better functioning of it, we can observe that there is a clear classification of gender roles.

To put it plainly, gender roles refer to society's concept of what social duties men and women are expected to fulfil and how they should behave when engaged in diverse social practices. This implies that all those borne with the female sex are attributed with the gendered ideal of woman, while a male is attributed that of man, but this reveals to be restrictive as one's gender identity is not always correspondent to their biological sex. To observe this gender order is quite easy, but to understand it or why it even exists is truly challenging. As a whole, the idea of gender in everyday life tends to be taken for granted, in the sense that for many the gender order is just something that is and there is no need to think further about it. Even more, gender tends to be used as a social stimulus.

We immediately recognize someone as being a boy or a girl, man or a woman, and we arrange everyday interactions according to these distinctions. The beliefs that hold the collective consciousness' assiduity about gender- appropriate behaviour are constantly being stimulated by the constant circulation of information offered by various professional positions which are held to a certain esteem. Through the veil of upholding social morality, the members of said society will hold those deviants from the status quo accountable by shaming and harassing them. This especially happens to those who present a gender ambiguity or when their gender does not match their sex. The reason for this is that they do not conform to what has become to be considered the norm, and by challenging it, those who hold traditional values react aggressively. The media, for example, is one of the main sources that encourage set traditional norms (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

The various events that occur in the media and in real life are not only a showcase of the set differences and consequences of set behaviour but also help in keeping and further creating gender differences by constantly displaying suitable examples of masculinity and femininity. From this statement, we can deduce that being a man or a woman is not something present. This idea became the basis for one of the pioneering gender theories. Gender theory states that gender, in the sense of one's identity, is constantly developing and changing rather than something predetermined by nature. Simone de Beauvoir is the one that launched this theory in her book, entitled *The Second Sex,* where she stated that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir, 1949:330). Although this phrase alone requires additional and extensive analysis, which is addressed when the discussion reaches the various social theories concerning gender, one important argument that needs to be added is that 'the positions of women and men are not simply parallel, the principle is also true for men: one is not born masculine, but has to become a man' (Connell, 2009:5). One of the reasons de Beauvoir's quote is considered monumental is because those few words reflect the complicated process of the development of gender identity within a person.

Considering the above statement, it is appropriate to argue that the concept of gender identity is seen as a body's own conception of self, concerning the social and psychological idiosyncrasies they associate with their sex. Binary sex categories, from a sociological point of view, hold certain personality traits, which are expected of individuals to play out in social settings depending on their

morphological appearance, which are not inherently present at time of birth. Rather, as de Beauvoir postulated that in order for gender to be attained and infiltrated in a person's identity, it is necessary for them to be exposed to the process of socialisation. Meaning that the child is required to undergo years of formation and education regarding the social expectations associated with their sex. This process takes place well into adulthood and is seen as being highly complex and uncertain. This is because even if, for example, a male child is exposed to behaviours, domestic and professional practices and hobbies that are socially attributed to his sex, there is no true assurance that the child will identitfy with them. In other words, even if one is set in a highly binary and traditional environment there is no guarantee that the individual will grow up identifying with their expected gender. Furthermore, some adolescents may place a higher importance on their gender identity than others. Several authors have emphasised the multiple aspects of gender identity and have highlighted that the most frequent method of measurement and labelling one's identity is by the traits the individual perceives as being expressive or instruments to the process of presenting the self. Sinclair and Carlsson (2013) dispute that this perspective is lacking and has been criticised, as the 'construct of attribute self-perceptions is distinct from gender identity (see Perry & Pauletti, 2011; Tobin et al., 2010)' (Sinclair & Carlsson, 2013:466). They go on to refer to the fact that they view gender identity in regards to the manner in which people assess and view their feelings and interpretations concerning their membership to certain gender categories. There is also a need to look at one's gender concerns, in the sense of individual evaluation and placement by others in specific realms of femininity or masculinity. Meaning that, especially during childhood and adolescence, there is a fear of being placed by others in gender boxes that do not fit one's own view of the self. This might lead to the youth adopting a stereotypical strong gender identity, one that is socially accepted and is in accordance with their biology, in order to evade criticism or alienation from their community. This perspective on gender is also applied in this research. Further details on the operationalization of gender are given in chapter 3.

People who conform to gender polarization are also known as cisgender. The term cisgender was coined in the 90s by transgender activists as a form of criticism towards the ongoing discourse and rigidness in the definitions of sex and gender. Etymologically, created through the addition of the Latin *cis-*, which translates to 'the same side as', to gender that is ultimately based on the Latin

genus that means type or class. Therefore, this word is 'used to describe individuals who possess, from birth and into adulthood, the male or female reproductive organs (sex) typical of the social category of man or woman (gender) to which that individual was assigned at birth' (Aultman, 2014:61). In other words, a person is cisgendered when their biological sex matches with their gender identity, while a transgender person's gender identity is on "the other side" of their assigned at birth sex. This implies that the process of developing a gender identity is based on a person's subjective sense of their maleness or femaleness. Meaning that if we were to imagine an axis where on one side we find "true-femininity" and on the other "true-masculinity", *Person X* can fluctuate on it depending on what it considers that it reflects on itself. Hence, one can identify as agender (gender neutrois), transgender, cisgender, bigender, third gender, or other terms that fall under the non-binary umbrella.

1.1.1. The Third Gender Category

The existence of societal structures that accept and recognize multiple gender categories comes as essential proof regarding the social processes that move within gender and comes as a powerful disproof of biological essentialism. These types of societies look at gender in more complex terms, meaning they do not see only men and women, but also various categories that either represent combinations of the two or even a third gender category that is disassociated from the normalised binary system. Some examples of these types of society are found among the indigenous cultures of south-west regions of North America, where the collected ethnography literature shows, that they have various non-binary gender categories under terms such as berdache that translates to a person with two souls (Williams, 1986). The two souled people are seen as individuals who have a male body, but who are spiritually diverse and are positioned in a social category closer to that of women that the one linked to his biology. Another example of such a gender diverse society is that of the Javanese. The traditional Javanese societal structure provided a social position and a space where they could be themselves for a gender category that they called the 'banci'. The banci people were similar to the berdache, in the sense that this category was given to men who exhibited a female disposition in regards to their behaviour. What is different is the fact that the banci would dress in female clothing and engage in sexual activity with other straight males. This type of relationship even

among men provided a hierarchical classification within the system of social power. This is most obvious in Brazil, where those who are physically classified as men but engage in sexual relations with other men become entangled in the prevalent sex culture. The concept of a third gender is interesting to analyse in the case of the Brazilian people as they offer a view on how society imposes certain labels on individuals although they might not fully identify with them (Parker 1991). In the case of these men who are not considered as such, they may also not regard themselves automatically as female but rather the answers to that lie somewhere else on the gender axis or even somewhere else completely.

The communities discussed above show that the processes of gender are inherently complicated and diverse, and whether the concept of a third gender made any sense for them and if it would make for current Western society is still under rigorous debate. One thing is clear across the border when it comes to these communities and the social changes they underwent during the years. Once exposed to the European colonisers of the time they became vulnerable to change. Of the Brazilian people, the seventeenth-century Dutch chronicle Gaspan von Barlaeus wrote that "beyond the Equator sin does not exist" as a form of condemnation of their unrestrictive sexuality and lax view on gender (Parker 1991: 289). They were viewed as being dangerous and seductive for the European tourists who appeared in search of any sensible excuse to exercise all forms and manners of sexual misbehaviour. In other areas of North America, Spanish colonizers unleashed with religious terror various brutal practices that were aimed at the destruction of the indigenous customs and beliefs. Although these groups of people were forced to change their way, their ancient customs have not fully vanished, as in contemporary Indonesia the banci category still exists but now they are mostly representing a specific sexual category related to men (Oetomo 1996). On this note, the people of Brazil have also adopted a more modern view of gender and integrated the label gay to describe the similar relationship that once was accepted as a gender. In the new model, the partners are no longer viewed as having a contrast in power but rather as seen as equally masculine or as simply men that engage in same sex relationships.

In a 2001 survey on Global Sex, Dennis Altman highlighted that through the overreaching spectrum of globalization there is a leeway where the complexities of the interaction between sexual customs and gender regimes prove to be highly diverse. These complexities can be observed in Thailand where the sexual

categories and practices are formed based on economic and cultural inequalities. Peter Jackson (1997) took on a research project on this subject in which he showed a similar situation as in Brazil where 'the traditional Thai sex/gender categories for males were 'phuchai' (man, mainly heterosexual) and 'kathoey' (effeminate or cross-gender, receptive homosexual)'. The word kathoey can be literally translated as ladyboy and is associated with people who are biologically male, but they identify as being female. It is worth mentioning that transgender people are not what constitutes the third gender category as they identify as being either female or male. Being third gender constitutes the idea that a person does not associate itself with either binary option, but rather S/he is fluid when it comes to the various traits S/he assimilates in their identity format. In the kathoey situation, some identify as third gender while others say they are second category women (Winter, 2003).

Third gender categories in the last couple of years have begun to be legitimized by many states, permitting especially children who are born intersex to receive the X gender indicator on their official documents rather than being assigned a gender through surgical intervention in their infancy. One of these cases was discussed in the Netherlands where they offered the first gender neutral passport in 2018 to 'Leonne Zeegers with "X" marked as the gender on the passport instead of "male'' or "female"' (Gizauskas, 2018). Zeegers motivated this decision by the fact that she does not identify with either gender as she was born male but has been surgically reassigned as female. Other modern examples of third gender enactment occur in certain communities in India where individuals who are born intersex are known as hijra. This term is usually translated into English as eunuch which can be at times misleading as hijra are people who are usually born with genital or other sexual indicators in variation, not truly falling in any binary biological category -meaning they are intersex – but at times it also includes males who identify as female – meaning transgenders. An interesting account done on one of these individuals is done by photojournalist Dayanita Singh in her book called *Myself Mona Ahmed* where she writes about and presents, through various photographs, her friendship with Mona Ahmed, who was born intersex and identifies as third gender. In her book, Singh brings forward the effects of culture on the way we perceive gender and what is socially acceptable and she does this by transcribing pieces of conversations she had with Ahmed on this subject. Singh asked Ahmed why she does not go to Singapore to get a sex change surgery to Ahmed answered: 'You really do not understand. I am the

third sex, not a man trying to be a woman. It is your society's problem that you only recognize two sexes' (Singh, 2001).

If we were to analyse how the meaning of masculinity and femininity changed throughout time and cultures, it comes to our attention that the feelings we have regarding gender have a greater fluctuation depending on the dominating ideology, rather than having a constant structure. Consequently, it can be stated then that gender is fluid. Many researchers still 'cling to the modernist view that nature restricts culture, that the male and female are inalienable products of biology' (Herdt, 1994:32). The different ways in which gender is studied can be broken down into two categories: biological determinism and social determinism. This means that there are those who took Freud's axiom 'anatomy is destiny' in a literate manner and rationalised the behaviour and the basis of the man/woman experiences down to biology (Kimmel, 2011). This theoretical line of thought tends to push the binary system as being the "normal and natural", while the rest represent anomalies. At the same time, the other line of thought recognizes that culture is 'both more diverse than nature and more insidious in its potential to "play" symbolically with the classification of human bodies and minds' (Herdt, 1994:33). This play of culture is especially evident in European history when analysing the globalising current gender dichotomy compared to the way gender was viewed before eighteenth century Europe.

Cultural historian Thomas Laqueur (1990) argued that hitherto to the eighteenth century, even within European cultures there was not a simple dichotomous view on the expressiveness of male and female bodies (Laqueur, 1990). Although the current dichotomous system is restrictive in gender exploration, Marjorie Garber, known for her famous study *Vested Interests* (1992), found an impressive exuberance of diverse gendered behaviours in certain social settings, rather than adhering to the binary system of gender identity performance. This sort of findings can reflect many factors, such as an expression of cultural anxiety or a pre-existing need to explore various parts of one's sense of self. As more and more countries recognise the existence of third gender people, we begin to observe an increase in content production on the complexities a third gender person experiences. As stated in most modern cultures, the term "gender" refers to the binary distinctions based on the mainstream beliefs of the simplistic division of human biology between male and female. The modern cultural significance of gender is one of the main forces that push the existing dichotomy further to the point that it comes to be understood as if men and

women are completely different species. Different media products, published on distinctive platforms are a great catalyst in furthering the binary division and the belief that men and women are intrinsically different and therefore have specific labours and moral expectations attributed to their sex. This line of thought led to a whole group of people coming with "imperative" works of literature such as *Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus* and *What do women want?* These types of content keep pushing the narrative that men and women should not or cannot be able to understand each other because they are simply different species, or that they are "naturally" wired differently. Although from some scientific perspectives this line of thought is considered out of date and encouraging a binary, dichotomous manner in which gender is examined, there is still a considerable body of research that adopts this view of the concept. (Haferkamp et al., 2012).

This type of polarising view on gender does not only imply a completely different behavioural and biological structural pattern, but also leaves out the existing dichotomies that occur within a gender group. In other words, the contracts are not only present between the binary gender groups, but also among them. This means that the concept of gender ignores both the differences that occur among women and among men and how these differences impact the relationship patterns among them. The stereotypical beliefs about a gender category imply that the whole group that would fit into it must behave in the exact same way, creating a generalised point of view on a certain group of people, only based on the behaviour associated with their gender, while leaving out any differences and individual identities. When it comes to the definition of gender, the personal characteristics of an individual are excluded from the analytic process of its creation. Rather than focusing on the individual, it adopts a large-scale approach that tries to capture the shared capacities and differences of men and women as a group. If we were to analyse this from an economic perspective it is visible that the 'creation of goods and services in a modern economy is based on shared capacities and cooperative labour – yet the products are often strongly gendered, and the wealth generated is distributed in highly gendered ways, so this must be included in the analysis of gender' (Connell, 2009:10).

When a pattern takes form and it integrates within social relations, while withstanding the test of time, it becomes what social theory calls a structure. Gender has a key place within social relations as it takes on the role of a guide through which individuals and groups act. It also is an essential pattern that is used in

forming social arrangements that govern everyday practices and responsibilities. Therefore, gender is a social structure, but a special one, as it links itself to the human body and aims to highlight the natural bodily distinctions between males and females. By linking itself to human anatomy, it pushes biological complexity and the reproduction process within the cultural pattern giving them symbolic value and therefore creating the steep existing contrast between the sexes. Bodily differences and the development of the human body have various cultural meanings all around the world. Some cultures may celebrate a girl's first menstruation to highlight her transition from childhood into womanhood, while others, such as the *quinceañera, use* the girl's age as a symbolic coming of age celebration. In Latin countries when a girl turns 15 years of age, she receives a *quinceañera* that represents a cultural pattern in which she is no longer considered a child and joins the community as a young woman. The men within the Jewish religion receive a similar type of celebration called the *Bar Mitzvah.* Until the boy reaches the age of 13 his parents are the ones responsible for the child's actions. Once he is 13 of age, he is given a *Bar Mitzvah* that represents his coming of age into manhood and from then on is considered accountable for his own actions and deeds. Jewish girls receive a similar celebration, called a *Bat Mitzvah* when they are 12 years old (Bacon, 2013).

1.1.2. Gender Ambiguity

Social practices are seen by theorists, in regards to gender, as elements that intensely contribute to mythicize significance, distinctions and values that are imputed to female and male bodies. Bodily diversity is not the only aspect that is compromised by these practices, but the reproductive difference is the most obvious aspect that is brought forward when engaging in the social arena. Because of this, it can be stated that social conduct is guided by these reproductive differences and that gendered practices are placed at their centre. Therefore, social processes become linked to the individual's biology when they step into the reproductive arena. This aspect further highlights the manner in which human bodies are perceived by society and the expectations that are placed on them when it comes to social roles, professions and conducts they adopt. These aspects are controlled and managed by the community and social settings during social interactions, as well as the position the individual is placed in. The reproductive feature of the body is not a direct influence or impact on the structural aspects of gender and

its associated meanings, but rather gender is a construct that finds its bearings in the hegemonic idiosyncrasies maintained and encouraged by the current leading ideology. The messages that are transmitted to the public formed and maintained according to the ideology is what guides individuals and collectives in the way they navigate social spaces. With this in mind, it is worth mentioning that gender is a highly flexible and multi-dimensional construct that is undergoing constant revision and reconstruction due to the constant change in public narrative, practice and views on structures. Gender has a broad outreach when it comes to the impact in hold on the development of a person's identity, as it encompasses multiple aspects of public and private life such as but not limited to division of labour, political discourse and sexuality (Barry, 2018). Gender ambiguity has always been a source that stirs one's curiosity, interest, and fascination towards exploring its different facets. These feelings can be collected from areas of both high and popular culture, from the theatre stages of Shakespeare's plays to the glamorous Hollywood sets. Just as well, ambiguity is also an object that raises repulsion and opposition in people, which led to diverse movements that aim to uphold the ideal nuclear traditional family and binarism. A relatively current event that captured the political sentiments concerning ambiguous displays of gender is Eastern Europe’s 2018 Blitzkrieg on gender equality and LGBTQ + rights, which saw liberal values as an attack on tradition, family, faith, and national pride (Kottasová, 2021). This shows that the fact that there is a necessity for resistance stands to indicate that these polarising gender boundaries are not as stable as they are made out to be. Not only does it underline the unstable structure of the binary system, but it also shows the lengths some will go in order to maintain it by promoting and encouraging inequality through different catastrophic scenarios that incite fear into the collective consciousness. Due to this, many still hold on to the old system as a form of maintaining the high moral ground and therefore fulfilling the duties assigned to their gender role. In other words, gender inequality is still prevalent and for a female individual it is still a great challenge to break the “glass ceiling” as most leading positions in religions, government institutions, and corporations are still held by men. Also, according to UNESCO’s 2017 Global Literacy report, 63% of the Global illiterate population are women, which shows that women's education is continuously less emphasised than that of men, making it exceedingly harder for women to be economically and socially independent. This distinction in education is the result of dictating the women’s role in

society within the domestic domain as a carer while the men recieve a lot more focus education wise as they are the breadwinners of the family.

On this note, I have a personal story from the time I was an intern at a German corporation as a master's student. While I was heading to have lunch with my work group and was squeezed in the elevator with about ten other people, one of my colleagues, a father of three boys, felt the need to inform me that he does not see the value in educating women, as once they marry, they basically become expired goods. This struck me as odd, not necessarily because of the obvious sexism, but because he was working with a quite high percentage of working mothers, and even his supervisor and the head of the department were females that also juggled work and family responsibilities. This shows that women are still held accountable to their reproductive function and even in developed countries pushed in the home environment. One might say that this was an isolated case, but when looking at the differences in education between males and females at a global level, things stop seeming so disconnected. Also, this mirrors the way female work is valued compared to male work. Regarding this contrast in valuing one's work, sociologist Georg Simmel theorised that 'the achievements and the commitments ... of males and of females in terms of specific values; but these norms are not neutral, standing above the contrast of the sexes; they have themselves a male character…' (Kimmel 2011:8).

If the most important criteria to establish a person's aptitudes is that he is of the male sex then there is a small chance, for those who are not, to fully distinguish themselves on their intellect and skill alone, as society will constantly use gender to subdue and silence those who do not fit the ruling category. Simmel goes on explaining that this value contrast occurs due to the fact that the 'standards of art and the demands of patriotism, the general mores and the specific social ideas, the equity of practical judgement and the objectivity of theoretical knowledge ... all these categories are formally generically human, but are in fact masculine in terms of their actual historical formation' (Kimmel 2011:8). What generally goes under human knowledge does not always engulf all sides of the human species, but rather it limits itself to its masculine side. This is mostly due to the patriarchal system that encourages values that are perceived as masculine and the guidelines for social and intellectual fulfilment are set as such. If humans – in the whole sense – are to claim full objectivity of ideas in the current social context then, as Simmel puts it, 'the historical life of our species

operates by the equation: objective = male' (Kimmel 2011:8). Due to this prevalent view on rationality, it has been noticed that male characteristics tend to be adopted by professionals and leaders who are females in order to be taken seriously and respected within their field.

In this context the white male, or even better put, the Western white male becomes the generalisable human being. He becomes in a sense invisible and under this said invisibility cloak white man privilege is hidden. Other sociologists would argue that, rather than being something simply hidden, privilege is more likely a consequence of said invisibility. By being invisible, privilege is difficult to notice unless it is pointed out and analysed in detail. The lack of awareness regarding privilege is one of the factors that make political changes to attain full inclusion difficult to pass. Of course, this does not mean that just because they become aware of their privilege and the inequalities that occur around them, they will automatically allow all- inclusive policies to go through. On the contrary, the majority will oppose even more strongly in order to still ripe the benefits of their position and status.

This type of behaviour can be noticed in every movement that campaigns for social change and inclusivity, which would mean the Western white male must let go of his privileged position and distribute his power to the other social actors. All of them were met with strong opposition and fear mongering techniques that were adopted in order to diminish its influence and retaliate against the conservatives who still hold traditional values as the key to social balance and proper order. The most recent example that can be given is the Fourth Wave feminism movement which was extensively criticized and attacked as being salacious and hysterical by supporters of white male privilege who saw that they were suddenly taken accountable for their inappropriate sexualized behaviour towards the women around them. The unequal and discriminatory behaviour that those lower on the social hierarchy faced was suddenly visible, but rather than pushing through the necessary policies that would give protection to those who need it, those in power have grown even more aggressive towards any kind of change that would take away their privilege.

Simmel's views on objectivity and the differences in the way we value the productions of men and women are still highly relevant in today's society. These contrasts take place in all sectors of life and they affect most of us. As presented in that small elevator story, the way a person's education and professionalism is weighed and acknowledged depends greatly on that person's biological output. In

his book *The Gendered Society,* sociologist Michael Kimmel shares his own experience with Simmel's theory of gender contrast. Kimmel recalls being invited in 2011 as a guest lecturer in a sociology of gender module that was taught by a female colleague and, as he entered the lecture hall, one of the students looked up and exclaimed 'finally and objective opinion' (Kimmel 2011:8).

He goes on stating that, of course, he is neither objective, nor more disconnected towards the subject matter than his female co-workers, but was perceived as such by the students due to the symbolic value of his sex. Because of this wide differentiation, Kimmel believes that he could probably get away with a lot more outlandish statements and behaviour than what female professors could enact in the classroom. Therefore, it is not inaccurate to presume that the 'objective = masculine' has highly unfavourable practical consequences. These presumptions and unbalance in the perceived behaviours and the work men and women produce is something that begins from the early stages of the available education institutions and will follow into the professional workspace and domestic environment of an individual's personal life. Simmel argues on this issue, stating that 'man's position of power does not only assure his relative superiority over the woman, but it also assures that the standards become generalised as generically human standards that are to govern the behaviour of men and women' (Kimmel 2011:9).

1.1.3. Gender and the Media

There is a level of unequal respect and double standard in regard to the accepted types of behaviours between genders and the way their work is perceived. One of the most discussed examples of events that highlight the double standardness between genders is the way displays of sexuality are viewed and how their symbolic significance changes depending on which gender expresses it. A professional area where this is most evident is in sports. Regardless of whether it is women's own league or female participation in men's leagues, the stigma persists. In situations such as the American football games, women take on the role of cheerleaders, that are placed there as side characters to the main event that is conducted by the men, in order to diffuse the tension and stir male desire. Similar to that are the ring girls in boxing matches, who are usually highly attractive models that, while dressed scantily, walk around the ring or cage while holding a large placard that indicates the next round. Both of these examples represent, as author Melissa Smith

argues, practices of 'blatant sexual exploitation' that exist to stimulate the male gaze (Smith, 2012). These practices extend to professional athletes as well. If we were to analyse images that present women's sport in juxtaposition with men's sport, we would observe a noticeable difference in the messages they send. The males are presented as serious, tough and powerful, while the females are positioned in such a way that makes them seem soft, elegant or even frivolous. This mindset extends to other fields as well, as there is a whole genre in comedy that aims on expressing and promoting contempt based on the stereotypical view of women as being stupid and trivial. There are countless industries and markets that rely on women's bodies to sell their products. From pornography to simple advertising, women's bodies have become objects of desire aimed at the consumption of men.

Equal opportunities in society and in the workforce reforms are usually halted by men and some women who maintain conservative and hierarchical views regarding sex. Usually, they are met with aggressive refusal and opposition to change by presenting related situations in a fear inducing manner. This strategic manoeuvre is applied in order to distract the public from the actual issue by presenting a hypothetical outcome, if the desired changes would be made, that would be far worse than if no changes were made at all. On this note, a survey conducted by Gallup in 2013 on Work and Education showed that there is not a lot of change taking place in the work and political market regarding leadership. The men and women who took the survey, when questioned on the issues of gender and expressed a preference for the gender of their leaders, said that they prefer a man rather than a woman. 'This situation is unchanged since Gallup first asked the question back in 1953' (Rose, 2018:112). As disheartening as this may sound, the study highlights some positive changes within this discourse. They found that people who are under 35 years of age are more likely to be unfazed by the gender of their leaders than those who are older. They also found that the prejudice some may have against female leaders disappeared once they worked under one, along with their preference for a certain gender. It is interesting to analyse this ongoing reluctance towards women in leadership positions and the stereotypes that surround them once they reach that top. This is mostly due to the way the idea of a leader is perceived by the collective. Meaning that, the expected behaviour from a male leader is one that denotes dominance, competitiveness and other types of agentic behaviours, that are traditionally associated with masculinity and manhood. Meanwhile, women are culturally

demanded to be nice and are expected to exhibit communal qualities, such as compassion and sensitivity.

Due to this cultural requirement of conforming to the prevailing ideals of womanhood, women are usually seen as too nice for the position of leader, yet if they do exhibit characteristics that are appropriate for the position and they showcase an agentic behaviour, they will be judged negatively and be considered socially deficient. American professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter, tackles this social discord in her 1977 groundbreaking book called *Men and Women of the Corporation,* in which she explores and examines the lives of women in upper management in the top 500 companies at the time. This book is impressive as its findings are still relevant after over forty years since its publishing. The situation has not changed much and her findings still hold true in any company that has less than 15% of the top positions filled by women. Kanter presents the way the rare women that do manage to hold a high-ranking position are viewed by those around them. She goes on commenting that the hiring organisations view their female employees as tokens and 'as a result they come under a particular type of pressure (any increased "tokenistic" value, such as being different from the dominant race or creed, heightens ensuing pressures still further)' (Rose, 2018:112). While doing her research, Kanter discovered three main things about these token women. The first observation she made was that the token women experienced an intense sense of visibility and attention that led to extreme work pressures and a need to stifle any emotional indicators. The second observation was that token women feel extremely socially isolated as they encounter heightened differences between them and the dominant gender, which led to them being rejected and at the same time, because of their position, they felt disconnected from the other female workers. The third was that these women knew that they were falling prey to being gender stereotyped and they faced expectations that fit those categories and therefore were pressured, even though they did not associate or identify with the box they were being pushed into. Kanter went on investigating these stereotypes in more detail and she came up with four distinct categories.

The four categories are split into two distinct symbolic classifications, or better said three out of the four – named by the author as the Pet, Mother and Seductress – represented the ones in which 'the woman is viewed as "acceptable" to men, but also essentially incompetent' while the fourth category – the Iron Maiden- 'is a role in which a woman is seen as competent, but because she is "not nice" or in anyway demonstrates "feminine"

characteristics she is also seen as abnormal and strange (and therefore not entirely trustworthy)' (Rose, 2018:113). During the time Kanter wrote the book, Margaret Thatcher was the first and only female prime- minister of the UK and due to the fact that she presented herself as a strong, passionate and incredibly witty leader, she became publicly described as the Iron Lady, a variation of the Iron Maiden. Her mediatized nickname stuck so well that even her biopic film from 2011 was named after it. The Iron Maiden/Lady from the seventies was passed on to future state leaders of the female gender such as Angela Merkel and Hillary Clinton. When Angela Merkel first came into office, the Daily Telegraph newspaper from the UK presented the new chancellor as being 'viewed in her party as slightly eccentric – a remarried, childless woman of protestant stock who presides over a male-dominated, predominantly Catholic union' (Connolly, 2005). Even the article's title creates a strong link between the two prime-ministers – *Let's follow the path Thatcher pioneered, says Germany's Iron Maiden-* and the fact that she is a woman that is about to occupy a position of power – like Thatcher did – is constantly highlighted throughout the article, as it is the weirdest occurrence imaginable.

This kind of profiling later followed Hillary Clinton, Theresa May, Nicola Sturgeon and lately the youngest woman to become a member of the U.S. House of Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Right after being elected, Cortez began being attacked on Twitter – a social media platform – for her choice of clothing by journalist Eddie Scarry, a reporter with the Washington Examiner, who commented that based on her clothing she does not look like a 'girl who struggles' (Butterworth, 2018). Eddie Scarry has faced backlash and has since deleted his tweet, to which Cortez answered that, unfortunately for Scarry, his misogyny cannot be deleted and continued pointing out that Scarry is 'a journalist – readers should know your bias' (WTIF Staff, 2018). Scarry's tweet highlights some of the main tools men use to undermine women who gain leadership positions, one of them being his use of the word 'girl' in this context, which comes off in a patronising and minimising manner of Cortez's capabilities and achievements. Hillary Clinton went through a similar experience in 2009 when she went for the President seat for the first time. Also, associated with the Iron Maiden title, Clinton was criticised for her use of power suits, more precisely because she wore trouser suits, which came out as a lack of feminine warmth. These types of reactions show that women who choose to step up and take the reins face extensive

adversity. This is mostly due to their lack of interest in acting out the imposed relational qualities that are expected of them as women in order to suit the male power structure. Because these women do not fit in the set cultural standards they come out as being too authoritative and stubborn, "made out of iron – not flesh and blood", beings which are not able to integrate within the male system in the allowed way, as women are expected today (Rose, 2018:114). These women are usually given the same epithets that are usually associated with Medusa or the warrior goddess Kali such as angry, scary, mean or bossy bitches. Even more, they are at times compared directly with these mythological characters. When Hillary Clinton was running for president in 2016, supporters of Donald Trump produced photoshopped pictures of Clinton's face on Caravaggio's Head of Medusa painting. But even more memorable was the readaptation of Cellini's bronze statue of Perseus holding the severed head of Medusa. In that picture we are presented with the heroic male adversary and killer of the evil female. The face of Trump was imposed on that of Perseus and of Hillary on that of the oozing head of Medusa which can be seen as pretty much 'part of the everyday, domestic American decorative world' (Beard, 2017: 76-79).

This form of classification is not something new as the place of women in the room where serious issues are discussed that would affect an institution or a state is a theme that was presented from ancient times. Various pieces of literature from the ancient Greek and Roman period, present how women were pushed into silence when it came to important matters and in the case a woman does voice her opinion she is presented as being androgynous. For example, in *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus the reader is introduced to the antiheroine Clytemnestra, who became the effective immediate ruler of her city as her husband is off fighting in the Trojan War. The play presents Clytemnestra as beginning to lose her femininity, or that she is becoming a man, as she took on the responsibilities of the leader. The author, constantly throughout the play, uses masculine terms and language when presenting her to highlight the fact that she is no longer a simple woman. This becomes an excuse for Clytemnestra's position in her city as she is presented by Aeschylus as being partly male, her hold of power is at length excusable, at least until her husband returns. But, when Agamemnon does return, in order to keep hold of her power, Clytemnestra stabs him to death in his bath and therefore remains the ruler. This is distributed when her children decide to kill her and restore the patriarchal system. This sort of view of women and

power is one that transcended time and can still be found today. On this note professor Mary Beard states that one 'can't easily fit women into a structure that is already coded as male; you have to change the structure' (Beard, 2017).

By analysing the prospective behaviour that these women have to get through in order to reach a leading position, it is not surprising that women might shy away from it. However, aligning oneself with the stereotypical forms that are more accepted by the male colleagues can also prove to be unsatisfactory. Kanter's category of the Pet stereotype is associated with women that manage to enter the board of a company and who are only reduced to a tokenistic value. She becomes the mascot of the company and she may be used to win diversity points from the public eye, but her capabilities are not viewed as being competent or of value, therefore being reduced to the cute and girly good old sport that is good for a laugh. The Mother is a woman whose nurturing traits are being exaggerated by the people around them and are not perceived as a threat even by those in competition with them due to their unsexualized, overbearing image. When the Mother type tries to exert her authority she is viewed as being boring and bossy with a lack of essential smartness or taste. Due to this, the Mother role is essentially understood as being 'too paternal and humourless to be "the boss" and too nice to be a leader, so her stereotype, while having some capability, still prevents her from taking a key leadership role' (Rose, 2018:115). Yet out of all of Kanter's stereotype categories, the most mediatized one is that of the Seductress. This category shows a type of woman that rises up the hierarchy and she has great social skill, succeeding in creating alliances within her company, impling she is very capable and intelligent. The implication is that she is "'sleeping with the boss" (or trying too); a "vamp" who "eats men for breakfast"' (Rose, 2018:115). This mentality provides a chance for judging her on her attractiveness level and therefore diminishing her achievements and her competencies.

Regarding the cultural standards female professionals face, Australian social scientist Clare Burton (1987) who also worked as an equal opportunity commissioner highlighted the existing bias for males when it came to selection and/or promotion of staff members. She noticed that there is a pervasive tendency in companies dominated by men to carry on favouring males and providing a pleasant environment for them to thrive. Beard also argued that due to the fact that men control most of the power within the state it is not surprising that equality within organisations seems far

reaching. It becomes plain to notice that men hold the control over the means of force and production in all areas of the contemporary world (Burton, 1987). The situation though is not as bleak as it appears, in the sense that, according to professor of management and organisations Alice Eagly during her research she noticed that the more women occupy high ranking positions and 'the more people experience [them] as the boss', resulted in the 'disappearance of stereotypes and in an increase of confidence in women leaders in general' (Rose, 2018:115). Still, inequality and gender preferential promotion takes place in various industries and institutions, but this is most obvious in religious organisations where women are indoctrinated from a young age to be subservient to men and conscious of their bodies as a source of temptation and sin. Women within religious organisations still live under the curse of Eve and are reminded that their place in society is below men as punishment for Eve's original sin. Besides sinning herself, Eve is seen as a temptress and the source of Adam's banishment from the Garden of Eden, an outlook that still hunts womanhood today. In most sexual assault cases, the female victims are still under a magnifying glass where the society's careful eye searches for motives that would exempt the perpetrator from his crimes and put all the blame on the victim.

There are plenty of arguments and debates on the structure or structures that promote and create the necessary space in which female oppression can take place. In Woman's Estate (1971), Juliet Mitchell believes that the oppression women face is not due to the cause of one structural form, but rather of four essential ones, such as: production, reproduction, socialisation, and sexuality. Mitchell also noticed that, during the time she wrote her book, the use of the term sexism has changed. Until the 70's sexism was synonym, in a way, with male chauvinism, while now the 'concept is a clear analogy with 'racism' and indicates the inferiorization (attitudinal and actual) of one sex by the other' (Mitchell, 1971: 60). Society, in this sense, becomes divided by gender and, in this divided society, male chauvinism describes the individual's behaviour while sexism is an adjective reflective of the whole. Kate Millett's explorations of this concept are well put together in her theory of sexual politics and in her theory of patriarchy which are found in *Sexual Politics*. In her works she presents the existing sexual relationship between the two binary genders and she compares it to Weber's phenomenon defined as herrschaft, which represents the idea of a relationship based on dominance and subordination. Her theory of sexual politics brings to the foreground the unacknowledged

institutionalised social order in which it is 'the birthright priority whereby males rule over females' (Millett, 1970:25). The use of sex as a tool to incite control over a person has become an ingenious system in which one group has achieved in colonizing the interior through ways that appear muted, but through pervasive means has successfully managed to ideologically instate itself in the dominating cultural system and providing them with the concept of power. In this sense the current prevailing ideological system in our society is patriarchy which can be loosely translated as the rule of the father, but through a sociological perspective it represents the universal -geographical and historical – rule of men by holding the power in relationships and dominance over the female sex. Due to the current system, Millett states that it is important to hold in mind the 'supernatural authority, the Deity, "His" ministry, together with the ethics and values, the philosophy and art of our culture – its very civilization- as T. S. Eliot once observed, is of male manufacture' (Millett, 1970:25).

We experience gender disparities through our daily lives that have installed into our subconscious level the contemporary gender logic, that implies the way we engage with one another in both the public and the domestic domain. As Millett pointed out through her theory, the domestic space offers the best view on gender disparities, which undeniably leak into the public space as well. In other words, the state may recognise both men and women as citizens, but under the existing heterosexual code they are presented as complete opposites, and due to this difference the disparities are enhanced within the domestic realm labeling women by default as housewifes and the caregivers of children. Because of these gendered expectations in personal relationships, when women enter the public space they are faced with an uphill fight for their rights as citizens and for their authority to be taken seriously. To solve this problem they might adopt one of the stereotypes as presented by Kanter, but regardless of their choice they still have to fight for their credibility and to be taken seriously for their work. This implies that regarding gender, the challenges it comes with are due to its multi-structured and internally complex construction.

These structures differ from author to author, but one of the models that provides inclusion of different social dynamics, forms of inequality and internal logic is offered by sociologist Sylvia Walby. Her account is in Theorizing Patriarchy (1990), where it presents six distinguished structures that persist within the modern form of patriarchy which are: paid employment, household production, culture, sexuality, violence and the state. Walby looks at the first

sociological concept used in theorising social inequality, which is class. She finds it appropriate to look at the relationship between class and gender, as women from various classes have met conventional approaches when it comes to employment. There is significant empirical evidence that shows that a woman's wage brings a significant amount to the household income and that 'a wife's wage prevents many households falling into poverty' (Walby, 1970: 9). Although Walby is against the use of class as a concept in non-economic contexts, she argues that it is essential in the case of gendered economics as it helps to distinguish 'housewives and husbands as classes, but men and women are not' (Walby, 1970:13). By this we can deduce that, because of the economic values attached to the social concept of husband or housewife, we are presented with the opportunity to observe from a class perspective the inequalities between the two, while men and women without the social title are analysed simply based on their gender.

Technically men would be benefiting greatly from this inequality of gender arrangements, but that is not always the case. As mentioned before, gender is diverse within its own category, meaning that not all men are alike and conform to the same type of masculinity. Therefore, men and boys who do not conform to the dominant version of masculinity are often vulnerable to physical and/or verbal abuse. Discrimination occurs not only between genders but also in the same gender category, mostly when one sex does not fully conform to the gender norm associated to it. This type of discrimination can begin from the early stages of education through the forms of bullying and it can continue well into adulthood. Still, this does not signify that the men who identify with the dominant form of masculinity do not have a price to pay when it comes to gender inequality. One comes from the difference in education and economic independence. In other words, from an economic perspective, gender inequalities that women face also impact men by putting more pressure on them as stereotypical bread winners and financial providers for their whole family. The issue of education between sexes and its impact on society has been discussed for years by various thinkers. British philosopher John Stuart Mill, on this subject, has famously written the essay The Subjection of Women (1869) where he argued that the 'the basic reason for inequality [is] not in men's moral superiority but in physical force' (Connell, 2009: 34). This is an argument that Adichie also makes. She argues that the world in which we live has changed drastically and in this new format the person most qualified to lead is not necessarily the most physically strong. Rather than being

strong physically, today's leaders need to be able to exert intelligence, knowledge, creativity and to have an innovative perspective. Adichie claims that there are no hormones attributed to these characteristics, meaning a man is just as likely as a woman to be able to perform these characteristics. Humans just as the world around them have evolved, but 'our ideas of gender have not evolved very much' (Adichie, 2014:18).

These arguments are contrary to what Rousseau believed, as he saw women as being completely irrational beings. In *The Social Contract,* Rousseau begins his work by stating that 'all men are born free, and everywhere he is in chains'. At first read it would appear that he uses the word man in the sense of human being, yet Rousseau makes himself clear by writing in his book *Emile* that 'men and women are not equal' and therefore the word man in this context refers only to the male sex. Rousseau's statement implies that men are constricted and formed due to their social situation, as he goes on implying that a slave is not born, a slave but becomes one due to the space in which he develops. This string of thought was later picked up by de Beauvoir who included women in the development process, an element which Rousseau eliminated from his theory. His reasoning for this was that he viewed women's way of being as caused by nature rather than nurture and that women are naturally intended 'to please man and their education must be wholly directed to give [men] pleasure, and to be useful to them' (Rose, 2018:117).

This inequality is mostly due to the biological differences between the two sexes, as according to Rousseau men are naturally 'active and strong' while the other is 'passive and weak' (Rousseau). This way of thinking became highly prevalent and influential in the sense that it is still used as an excuse or as a reasoning when gender equality discussions are brought forward. Adichie continues this argument stating that there is no denying that biological differences between men and women exist, women can have babies, men cannot and due to their high levels of testosterone, men are usually stronger than women. Yet as she stated above, though physical strength might have been a requirement for a high-ranking position in past societal formats, it is not the case anymore and still, the higher one goes, the fewer women there are within the available institutions and organisations. Although Rousseau's writings were quite revolutionary at the time and provided a great base for the concept of socialisation and its importance in the creation of one's identity, his more misogynistic statements were not left without criticisms.

The most memorable response came from his friend and fellow philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft. Through her work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman,* she won her place as the first to coin a theory of gender. Influenced, as her contemporaries, by the political thought behind the French Revolution, Wollstonecraft applies the basic arguments of the Enlightenment to the concepts of family, woman and private sphere, elements that were paramount for the foundation of modern-day Feminism. In her book she argues that her fellow male thinkers such as Jean Jacque Rousseau and Thomas Paine use traditional social and political theories for various areas of social life, but they ignore the inequalities and oppression in the gender field. She takes women and places them as equal members of the human species by arguing that male thinkers, through their discourse, reduce the woman to 'the scale of animal being' and are viewed by their male counterparts as being 'in a state of perpetual childhood' (Wollstonecraft, 1792: 3-4). Therefore, Wollstonecraft argued that 'it is time to effect a revolution in female manners – time to restore them to their dignity – and make them, as a part of the human species' (Wollstonecraft, 1792: Cover).

In other words, she refuses the fate Rousseau forces women into, as a mere object whose sole purpose is to provide pleasures to men. An advocate for female education, she encourages females to embrace their rationality and to refuse 'those pretty feminine phrases, which men condescendingly use to soften our slavish dependence' (Wollstonecraft, 1792:5). Men are able to hold women dependable by holding monopoly over proper education, while women receive a satirising version of it that focuses on the elements that would make them alluring for the only social factor that offered them an opportunity to rise in society – marriage. In other words, women were receiving an education that limited them to the future role they could take which was constrained within the institution of marriage. Because of this, women were rendered as simple objects of desire, reduced to 'empty-headed playthings' and this gave men full control over aspects of life (Wollstonecraft, 1792:7). This view on the female's nature is one that is still prevalent today, epistemological baggage that helped in contouring the existing stereotypes associated to the female sex and to the roles associated to it.

The current gender roles came into fruition during the Industrial revolution. This period created a shift in the way work was valued and a separation between work and the home or, as Oakley (1974) puts it, what we know as housework came into being by the separation of the home from the workplace. Industrialization created the idea that work took place away from the home 'and

family and the home became a place of consumption rather than a place for the production of goods' (Giddens A, 2009:889). Due to this, domestic work became something 'invisible' as it lacked any type of wage, while the 'real work' became known as paid labour. After the second world war women were being pushed out of the work market and into the home, as it was considered their appropriate and natural environment where they needed to engage in housework while their male counterparts were preoccupied with 'real work'. This led to the creation of what we know now as the conventional model that was formed due to the domestic division of labour that separated the domestic responsibilities between household members. 'Women (housewives) shouldered most, if not all, of the domestic tasks, while men 'provided' for the family by earning a 'family wage'' (Giddens A, 2009:889). To this division of labour children are exposed to from first moments of their life, or even pre-birth as discovering a child's sex with modern technology happens after the first trimester. Already, at that point, parents and those connected to them attach a gender role and all characteristics associated with that pre-set role.

Once the child is born S/he will be offered toys and clothes associated with their assigned gender and they will be exposed to the set of rules related to it. For example, if a baby has a female sex, she will be given pink clothes and the toys she receives are related to the domestic domain, such as dolls that signify a baby that comes with bundled or separately bought tools necessary to "take care of it", and other miniature domestic objects (easy play ovens, washing machines, completely equipped dolls houses and so on). This is done in order to initiate the child from a young age as a future care giver. While boys are given toys such as building blocks, cars and chemistry sets, the type of toys that help them prepare to become future members of the workforce. These are also considered elements that contribute, as an aid, to the process of socialisation. The process of socialisation refers to social and cultural inner workings through which individuals take on the expected qualities and characteristics, in order to acquire a sense of self, within their existing environment. It is through the socialisation processes that people become aware of the societal expectations of them as males or females.

1.1.4. Gender Socialisation

Socialisation is seen and considered by many a paramount concept within sociological studies when it comes to understanding social behaviour and predominant beliefs that impact a

considerable size of the population. Overall, the concept of socialisation is seen as a process that begins from the moment of birth and carries on into adult life. A more appropriate and scientific definition of the concept is offered by Kalmus (2006), who states that socialisation is composed of two aspects. The first aspect she associates with the concept is that 'socialisation means transmission of the culture of the society to individuals' while the second aspect 'of socialisation derives from the point of view of the individual and means the process of becoming human in one's social environment' (Kalmus, 2006: 226). This stance is held by other scholars as well (Fromme, 2006) and it is impugned that although it is possible to sustain the aspects of socialisation, they offer a wider array of analysis as two separate categories. The two aspects are seen as analytical tools that aid the researcher in uncovering data at both a macro and micro level. The concept of socialisation is viewed at a macro level when the researcher intends to set a practise guided by the predominant ideological agenda which is promoted through a society's culture, institutions (such as school) and mediated communication (i.e., TV, cinema, internet, radio and written press). In contrast, when analysing this concept from a micro level, scholars argue that it encapsulates the social practices that take place between individuals and their socialising agents during interaction. In the earlier stages of life this level of analysis is especially visible in the familial context of interaction between its members.

The concept of gender is visible and an essential part in both aspects that are present in the socialisation process. One main element that a person might encounter in their development when it comes to their gender identity formation and the type of gendered behaviours, they might be expected to have during interaction is through the display of gender roles which are acted out by their family members or guardians. As soon as a child's sex is revealed, as it can be observed in the multiple gender reveal clips on Youtube, the gender socialisation process begins. This is done at first by receiving a certain colour theme that is socially considered to be associated to a specific sex, while later on it continues with the acquisition of certain gender segregated items (i.e., toys, clothing, books and so on). As they grow children assimilate these rules of gendered interaction as they are shown to be eager to learn about their environments. Concerning this aspect, Giddens states that as the young become accustomed to the social expectation regarding their morphology, they 'adopt 'sex roles' and the male and female identities (masculinity and femininity) that accompany them'

(Giddens, 2009:623). Regarding this element of socialisation, scholars, such as Wharton argued a similar discourse with Kalmus, in the sense that she also believes that socialisation holds two aspects that impacts the level of socialisation. A difference that was noticed is that it especially identifies these aspects when she looks at the process of socialisation in relation with gender. Meaning that the first aspect of gender formation is given to the new-born through the contact S/he has with their parents or caretakers and, afterwards, it is solidified by the external agents, that due to the prevalence of media, have begun their work from a much younger stage of life (Wharton, 2005).

A great example that shows just how deeply implicated gender is within the societal paradigm, is the BBC's social experiment called *Girls Toys vs. Boys Toys: The Experiment.* The aim of this experiment was to pinpoint how difficult it would have been to achieve gender equality. The concept structure of this experiment is quite simple as it involves a simple clothing swap. They dressed baby boys in girls' clothes and vice-versa, and they asked the volunteers to play with the babies with a wide variety of toys they made available. The result came out as they predicted, the boys in girl clothes received soft toys and dolls while the girls in boys' clothes were given robots and cars. 'The volunteers were shocked to find out they had walked into a trap and had, without hesitation, projected their stereotypes directly onto the infants' (Rose F, 2018:98). The socialisation and its effects on the formation of a social actor's identity formation is as shown quite complex and unpredictable at times and due these aspects it will be discussed and analysed in detail in the Identity chapter. To continue on the issues of gender it is important to understand the effects socialisation has on the individual and the various ways gender inequality can be reduced if not fully extinguished.

1.1.5. The Feminist Perspective

Through her political lens, Kate Millet has argued that a way to diminish gender inequality is to focus on the domestic realm. She claims that 'female oppression begins at home', so it seems suitable to start by analysing the gender dynamic between the parents and think about the message it sends to the child (Rose F, 2018:99). If a young child watches his mother do all of the housework and be the caretaker all of the time, s/he will grow up thinking that it is a woman's job. Gender arrangements represent a plethora of stimuli that become a source of recognition, pleasure and harm. In this

sense gender becomes an inherently political mechanism, in which the reforms against inequality and oppression fight for new ground. The government system uses gender as a form of control over its population and to implement its own ideology in the territory it manages. This type of patriarchal political governance, where a woman had limited rights and her husband or father was her keeper (in some cultures they still are), is what ignited the movements that campaigned for women's rights.

Launched by the suffragette movement in the beginning of the 20th century that advocated for the right to vote in public elections, and for the first time, publicly challenging in an international fashion the notion that women are intellectually and physically inferior to men, marked the start of the political and sociological wave known as feminism. The word feminism and the association to it (meaning to be a feminist) is a somewhat loaded concept and it usually comes to be considered as something that comes with heavy negative baggage. Feminism, being the movement behind the study of gender becoming a reality, is usually met with hostility and distaste. Having met with this strong opposition myself, in my first years of study when I began exploring the movement and understanding the complexities of the structural processes within gender, I came to the conclusion that it was easier and safer to call myself an equalist rather than a feminist. This is mostly because the word feminism denotes preferentiality towards one gender while looking down on the other and this makes men feel threatened and challenged when it comes to their position of power. Or in other words, they are afraid of the social situation reversing and finding themselves in the position of women. Also, it has become to be associated with more extreme versions of feminism which is mostly popularized through various media but this sort of mentality is exactly what Feminism is fighting against, as it is in itself sexist and discriminatory, as it puts one gender in a dominating status above the other. In an interview with Trevor Noah, Adichie discusses her own stumbles against the word feminist and recalls how people asked her why she does not call herself a humanist or an equalist. Feminism represents all these forms of ideology, it stands for equality, but, as Adichie has put it, 'feminism is about justice for everyone but you have to name a problem and the problem is women who have been excluded' (The Daily Show, 2018). The basic definition of feminism, as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie coins it in her essay *We should all be Feminists,* is the movement that takes action for achieving social, political and economic equality of the sexes, while a feminist is defined as a person who believes and holds onto

these principles of equality (Adichie, 2014). She goes on arguing that this applies to men and women, as they are both constrained by the overreaching and invisible patriarchal system, and therefore, for her, a feminist is a man or a woman who recognizes the problems of gender, as it is coined within the current environment and strives to fix and make things better.

There is an overall consensus that feminism is a social movement that recognizes and advocates for equality in all sectors of modern life, for all people, regardless of their gender. Yet out of all descriptors of the movement, one that left an impression is written by Marie Shear. In 1986 for the *New Directions for Women* feminist newsletter, Shear wrote that, for her, feminism 'is the radical notion that women are people' (Thaler-Carter, 2019). This statement might appear to have a humorous nuance, and in a way it does, but it speaks volumes on a prevalent social view of women's inherent nature. It speaks out on the basis that females are not truly viewed as fellow human beings, but rather as an extension of the male. Therefore, Shear's definition comes indeed as a radical notion that pushes the female alongside the male in the category of full-fledged human beings. This statement also highlights the commitment feminism has in its quest of achieving equality for the sexes and it points out that although men might seem to benefit from their dominating position, they also encounter restrictions within their gender category. This movement made itself noticeable between various waves that acted as a catalyst for the creation of gender studies and its integration within sociology.

Feminist Waves included campaigns 'for women's right to vote, and for women's presence in anti-colonial movements and representation in independent governments; campaigns for equal pay, for women's right to own property, for homosexual law reform, for women's trade unionism, for equal employment opportunity, for reproductive rights, for the human rights of transsexual men and women and transgender people; and campaigns against discrimination in education, against sexist media, against rape and domestic violence' (Connell, 2009:8). All these movements have not been spared criticism and opposition from the ruling political class, that try to either annihilate a campaign all together or change its course in order to maintain the established order. Especially in the last couple of years gender politics have been on a new ground high and the anti-campaigns followed close behind, such as antigay, pro-life campaigns and men's movements that promote misogynistic practices and debates about the influence of Western feminism and cultural ideals and their dominance on the rest of the world. Out of

all of the Feminist Waves, some may argue that the second Wave had the most impact and pushed forward the most dramatic changes within society.

This wave managed to distinguish itself from the others by drawing attention to a realm of human reality not explored beforehand at the level that now it was demanded. It was this point that ignited what was to be considered modern day gender research, through the aid of 'political practice launched a deep change – which increasingly seems like a revolution – in human knowledge' (Connell, 2009:8). One of the main dimensions of gender that functioned as a fuel that ignited the first Women's Liberation Movement and central to the concept of patriarchy, which is defined as 'the idea of men as a dominant 'sex class', was the analysis of rape as an assertion of men's power over women, and the critique of media images of women as passive, trivial and stupid' (Connell, 2009:75). As Mary Wollstonecraft presented the power a husband had over his wife and the father over his daughter in 1792, we come to observe that these ideas are still accepted to some degree.

Even if centuries have passed since Wollstonecraft's time, the idea that the father is the head of the household and that men are the main breadwinner in the family is maintaining its position as the status quo. One of the most prevalent events that notes the continuing relevance of analysing gender power relations is the worrisome statistics around violence and abuse. In 2001 the results of a British crime survey 'found that 21 percent of British women, compared with 10 percent of men, had experienced non-sexual force or threat at some time in their life; when it came to sexual victimization, 24 percent of women, compared with 5 percent of men, had experienced sexual violence' (Walby and Allen 2004). The most recent British crime survey done for the year 2018 showed that the latest figures 'show little change in the prevalence of domestic abuse in recent years' (Elkin, 2018). In the year 2018 there have been an estimated 2.0 million adults aged 16 to 59 years who experienced domestic abuse in the preceding year (1.3 million women, 695,000 men) (Elkin, 2018).

It is therefore no wonder that the study of gender, due to its complexities and persistent dichotomies between the sexes, in both the public and the private realm, has become one of the biggest interests in research since the last few decades. It is a subject that is being analysed in multiple research disciplines such as biology, psychology, sociology, neurology and many more. Yet out of all the available areas of study, it is within sociology where we can truly and fully explore the gender dynamic. Gender studies has become a

prominent subfield of sociology. One of the main social theories regarding this subject is gender theory. Coined by the famous Simone de Beauvoir, this theory 'alerts us to the diversity of possible gendered identities and roles available, whilst emphasising the limited patterns of masculinity and femininity which we are pushed to repeat and repeat until they feel 'natural' '(Giddens A, 2009:620). She argues that, as they grow, boys are encouraged to become dominant little men and to be independent, while girls are taught that they need to value their appearance and to be passive, or in other words that 'their body is something to beautify, and that the world is something to be scared of' (Gidden a, 2009:621). De Beauvoir believed that passivity was a characteristic that was inherently linked to femininity, a trait that was imposed on women from a very young age hence 'it is a destiny imposed on her by her teachers and by society' (De Beauvoir, 1946:341). An identity in which she is constructed to be the Other, a relative object of male consciousness while the man took his place as the universal subject (Tidd, 2004).

On the other side of the spectrum, we have Talcott Parsons', functionalist theory which reflects on family roles in industrial societies (Parsons and Bales, 1956). Parson was particularly engrossed in the socialisation of children 'and argued that stable, supportive families are the key to successful socialisation' (Giddens A 2009:615). He viewed the family as a centre which operates most efficiently when there is a clear-cut sexual division of labour. Strictly speaking, Parsons' idea of a perfectly functioning family is one 'in which females act in expressive roles, providing care and security to children and offering them emotional support. Men, on the other hand, should perform instrumental roles – namely, being the breadwinner in the family' (Giddens A, 2009:615). He considers that the role men have to undertake is much more stressful than that of women and due to this, according to him, women should use their expressive and nurturing tendencies to stabilise and comfort them. This theory has been extensively criticised due to its extremely sexist and limiting take on gender by focusing primarily on complementary division of labour by using a non-funded biological distinction between the sexes and also promising that this extreme division would ensure the solidarity of the family.

The feminist waves, beside providing the groundwork for various theories relating to gender and its functionality in society, also paved the way for feminist theory. Feminist theory can be broken down in three main branches: liberal feminism, socialist feminism and radical feminism. Liberal feminist theory states that

the source to gender inequality lies in the cultural and social attitudes that exist concerning it. The liberal perspective focuses on providing women with the same social and political rights and opportunities as men, such as the right to education, to vote, to healthcare and so on. But this theory is usually heavily criticised as it fails to recognise the social structures that cause these inequalities in the first place. The socialist theory is connected to the Marxist theory of social conflict, which implies that capitalism intensifies women's 'subservience to men, because patriarchy (like class oppression) has its roots in private property' and therefore as a consequence 'capitalism intensifies patriarchy – men's domination over women – by concentrating wealth and power in the hands of a small number of men' (Giddens A, 2009:616). The position of women in society is analysed differently by radical feminism theory which views men as the sole entity responsible for and benefiting from the subjugation of women. Radical theory argues that within the domination system, meaning within patriarchy, 'male violence against women is considered to be part of a system of controlling women' rather than viewing these cases as being isolated and caused by men with psychological issues (Walby, 1990:3).

Gender hierarchy theory refers to the idea that gender is a fluid element, and within individuals there are many different expressions of masculinity and femininity. Theorists argue that, at the basic level of society, the contrasting gender versions are set in a hierarchy that is oriented towards the one defining premise in which men are set as the dominating figures over women. This hierarchical view of gender has come full circle due to the concept of hegemonic masculinities. This is a reinterpretation of the concept of hegemony – 'the social dominance of a certain group, exercised not through brute force, but through a cultural dynamic which extends into private life and social realms' (Giddens A, 2009:611). In the modern context, hegemony is established through the media, education, ideology, sports, music, literature and other similar channels. Connell claims that hegemonic masculinity 'is associated first and foremost with heterosexuality and marriage, but also with authority, paid work, strength and physical toughness' (Giddens A, 2009:611). Our media and pop culture offers a plethora of examples of men who embody hegemonic masculinity – from film stars such as Harrison Ford, rappers like 50 Cent and former president Donald Trump.

Through her Gender Performance theory, Judith Butler brings a more modern take on the issue of gender. Butler argues that gender is something performed, not inherent or biological. Gender impacts and creates a stylized act in the way we dress, the way we

talk, or how we present ourselves in public. Butler believes that this is how men and women are created. In contemporary society women are taught that they should take care of the way they dress in order to show off their figure and are discouraged from wearing loose, masculine clothing because that would be considered tomboyish or in being labelled a lesbian (Butler J, 1999). As individuals grow up they begin collecting information on the affinities of what it really means to be a man or a woman. These social theories are often presented and explored in different types of fictional literary work that focuses on societal patriarchal take on gender. Butler aims to show that the elements pushed onto the human body as inherent characteristics are actually cultural products that 'create the effect of the natural, the original, the inevitable' (Butler, 1999: viii). Hence, through her genealogical critique she aims not only to denaturalise these characteristics, but also to tear down the epistemological and ontological aspects that label them as natural. Consequently, she goes on stating that "The task of this inquiry is to centre on and decenter such defining institutions: phallogocentrism and compulsory heterosexuality' (Jagger, 2008:18).

All aspects of humanity lay within discourse and thus society, being part of human creation, is fully constructed out of symbolic meanings that paves the way to cultural systems. These types of systems are of a distinguished social interest and value as they grow out of the historical space in which they are laid. This sort of rationality is also applied to the created meanings of gender and the binary system, as the words man and woman come together with tremendous 'understanding, implications, overtones and allusions that have accumulated through our cultural history' (Connell, 2009:83). This states that the categories of the binary system came loaded with meanings enormously greater than their basic biological state.

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan provided one of the most accurate models of structure of symbolic meaning in gender through his analyses of the phallus as a master symbol which provided the ground for the interpretation 'of language as 'phallocentric', a system in which the place of authority, the privileged subjectivity, is always that of the masculine' (Connell, 2009: 83). In other words, Lacan suggests that, because meaning is highly centred around the phallic and that culture inhabited the rule of the father by default. By taking into account the centrality of language in creating the world around us, one can assume that in order to escape patriarchy the phallic value of language needs to adopt new forms. Feminist writers such as Xaviere Gauthier (1981) began to explore

female literature as an opposition to the standard laws of culture, while Chris Weedon (1987) examines the psychological determinism in feminist theory, which offers promises just for escape without presenting the option for opposition. Ergo, post-structuralism by Lacan's lead provides the necessary tools for escape, and consequently queer theory critique of heteronormativity provides the pavement for a strategic cultural disruption of the set norm.

Queer theory takes on a political position in rearranging identities and what is considered as "normal" through an 'energetic celebration of diversity in sexual identities and self-presentations, which takes pleasure in disruptions of familiar gender categories' (e.g., Bauer, Hoenes and Woltersdorff, 2007). Although in both post-structuralism and queer theory language, in its spoken and written form, is presented as the most accessible way in analysing the symbolic value of gender relations, the symbolic expression also changed over time and consequently so did the attitudes towards gender equality. In 2002 Ulrich Mohwald analysed how gender relations changed over time in Germany and Japan through extensive survey data. She shows that there is a significant change in attitudes in both countries towards gender equality and how the relationship between the genders should undergo. Mohwald found that following the key events from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Japan installed within its culture the housewife/breadwinner model, presented as an ideal format for middle class families, which until that point was historically unknown in this country. Although it was presented as an ideal functionalist format, it was not received without resistance, as following the 'Second World War, Japanese women endorsed both legal equality and this nuclear-family model,' and afterwards another 'shift of opinion followed the Women's Liberation movement, with increasing value placed on women's careers and sharing work in the home' (Connell, 2009:83).

1.1.6. Social media representations

In the case and context of the structural formation of gender through language we need to look at the "historicity of textuality and the textuality of history," in the sense that if both our past and present as a species and societal development are 'reflected and shaped by the explanatory logic of narrative, then the stories that we create in turn reveal the inescapable presence and power of gender symbolism' (Felski, 1995:1). Felski, in her book *The Gender of Modernity,* presents a detailed account of how modern cultural

texts, that reflect saturated metaphors of masculinity and femininity, are exposed to the masses through various mediums. Yet the first format was given through narrative fictional literary works which aimed to 'typically achieve some kind of formal coherence by dramatizing and personifying historical processes' where 'individual or collective human subjects are endowed with symbolic importance as exemplary bearers of temporal meaning' (Felski, 1995:1). Gender is an important constructive element towards the narrative as it shapes not only the context in which the story is told, but also the details that are attached to and that are left out, in order to provide the paramount characteristics linked to masculinity or femininity. Whether the subjects are feminine or masculine is also an important aid towards the decision on what 'philosophical assumptions underlying our interpretations of the nature and meaning of social processes' could be made (Felski, 1995:1). The gendering of media content and the presentation of gender in various contexts within various mediums (extending from fictional/non-fictional literature to digital content) will serve as a leitmotif throughout this book.

In this social research one of the main points of analysis is how one constructs his/her narrative on SNSs – for example Facebook, Instagram and Tik Tok – and what are the thought mechanisms behind the content, in relation to gender. There are two paramount steps that need to be taken. A post-structuralist analysis of the language, used in various works that provide a fundamentalist insight of our understanding of gender, can be provided through various pieces of literary fiction. Although it is assumed that these sources need to correspond with the scientific discipline they represent, that is not always the case. For example, materials that reflect on human life and offer a mirror to ones or a community's inner struggle can be a great contribution in relation with the existing data, or to offer an allegory of a certain theory. Books that belong to the fictional genre represent an immense pool that can be used as secondary data, or a data source in its own right by applying text analysis techniques.

Fictional books 'have increasingly been used by social research as a means of building critical consciousness, dismantling stereotypes and accessing hard-to-get-at dimensions of human experiences' (Blomdahl A, 2014:7). On this point it can be said that if the desired research subject is gender identity, one can consult a multitude of novels, plays and stories, which are written from a feminist theoretical perspective, in order grasp the different particularities and to get a better understanding of it. In this sense,

fiction can provide a 'vital and valid method of inquiry in the social sciences because all fictional works draw from the "real" world, or in other words, real life is the material source for fiction' (Rognstad M, 2012:22). Also, these pieces provide a good ground work for the next chapter where the representations of gender will be analysed from pieces of content presented in a more modern form, be them TV/ Web series, films, blogs, Facebooks/Twitter posts and so on. For the study of gender identity, combining field literature with different genres or domains offers a wider view of the intended research and 'a wider plate of human experiences' (Rognstad M, 2012:23). When exploring fictional literature, it can be taken into account that authors usually write from their own personal experience which leads to a type of ethnography combined with elements of the imagination. A great example of this is Virginia Woolf's Orlando, which is a mock biography of Woolf's friend and lover Vita Sackville-West.

Woolf's Orlando is a British aristocrat's journey through time, while experiencing life from both the male and female perspective. The novel starts off in the sixteenth century with the young nobleman Orlando, striving with love and the art of writing. Orlando is presented as a young nobleman, who is well educated and brought up with everything that he desires. As a man he takes part of the high British society, gaining many riches, a good position and reputation, time in which he also experiences his first love and betrayal. After he grows tired of life in England, Orlando decides to go abroad as an ambassador in Constantinople, where he is promoted to the rank of duke by the king of England. In other words, Orlando has undergone the proper socialisation process that befitted a young man of his status and has lived through that privileged perspective to the fullest without regarding other aspects of society.

After an impressive banquet, Orlando once again falls asleep, but this time, when he recovers, he realises that he is no longer a male. Orlando has gained everything a man can wish for, he had status and a high position in the British society, he also had a family: 'they found a deed of marriage, drawn up, signed, and witnessed between his Lordship, Orlando, Knight of the Garter, etc., etc., etc., and Rosina Pepita' (Woolf V, 1928). By his role of a man, he dies and is resurrected as a woman by Lady of Purity, Lady of Chastity, Lady of Modesty. As a woman she experiences the feminine part of life, managing to enjoy the opportunity of going through both sexes, emphasising the differences and more important similarities between them. She feels no different at first,

but as she slowly re-enters society, she is confronted by issues that every female from that epoch had to go through, such as: marriage, dispossession from property, lawsuits, and, because she is no longer a male, is considered dead. Orlando is courted by many men, but does not get married until the nineteenth century, when she finally meets and falls in love at first sight with Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine. Orlando travels in time for over 300 years from the 1600s till the modern age where she finally finds herself and comes to terms with his/her convoluted life.

Orlando is also a great allegory for Butler's Gender Performance theory, as within the novel, clothing is used constantly as a motif linked with one's gender identity. But also, for Connell's gender hierarchy theory, as Orlando's identity is not static when it comes to his/her gender, rather it fluctuates depending on the situation S/he faces. Rather than Orlando changing his character depending on the gender S/he associates with, it is the society around that pushes the individual to fit certain roles and behaviours that are linked to a body's sex. In other words, it is not so much about one's own sex, but more on how society perceives a person and on what social practices to apply when engaging in conversation or other social activities. On this subject the narrator states that "in every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place and often the clothes are the only things that keep male or female likeness" (Woolf V, 1928). This is also an argument that can be applied when discussing De Beauvoir's Gender theory as it challenges the 'extent to which society, and not biology, delineates distinction between "men" and "women"' (Rognstad M, 2012:29). The author manages to do this by creating tensions due to the character's duality, making way for countless possibilities. Due to his/her combined dual character of both male and female traits, Orlando becomes an androgynous rather than essentially a person with just one sex or the other. Cross-dressing is also a constant motif used throughout the novel. We have Archduke Harry who, in order to capture Orlando's attention and make him fall in love, is cross dressing as a woman. Even Orlando himself, when she takes on her woman form, cross-dresses into a man and wears 'clothes she had worn as a young man of fashion, and from among them she chose a black velvet suit richly trimmed with Venetian lace.' (Woolf V, 1928) A similar novel to Woolf's in the presentation of a gender neutral person, or at least whose gender fluctuates, is Jeffrey Eugenides' Middlesex, where we are introduced to Cal/lie and her/his journey from her conception as a girl, until one day in the middle of her teenage becoming, when she discovers that she is

neither a girl or a boy, but rather 'both at the same time' (Renneflott, 2011: 1). Eugenides' work provides a great account of the enactment of a third gender person and the difficulties that come with it in a binary social system.

Gender fluidity and the dysphoria that comes in the cases in which the liberty of identity is taken away and the reduced polarising view on gender has been expressed, is shown through various forms of artistic and academic expression. Due to this, one can state that, as the social construction of gender is inherently rooted in public consciousness, it is not too presumptuous to link it as a reflected factor in the process of – in this book' case- digital content production. Ergo, one's view on the gender realm can become an instrument of censure and restriction, or one of reflection and exploration of the construction of one's self. Gender, as a conclusion, is a structured social construct, whose symbolically loaded meanings are interiorised through years of socialisation, through the help of various channels, out of which, one of the most prevailing ones is represented by the multiple forms of mass media. Gender is in itself an ideological reflection of the dominating patriarchal system that places the two sexes in a dichotomous context (Scarcelli, 2024). Taking the form of a tool through which the masses can be controlled and dominated, it brings forward a behavioural guide that hides behind moral claims of conduct, which both males and females follow and are trapped within its rules.

1.2. Media and Social Life

The creation of the movable type by Johannes Gutenberg in 1455 is often considered to be the start of media. Although, as history pinpoints, given the long period of time it requires for media as we know it today to develop, one cannot really talk about any form of systematic media until the 1930's when media technologies were, as they still are today, the catalysts for social change and discourse. Academics and social researchers have developed an ongoing interest in the domain of media studies and on questioning how these newly developed technologies, and the media that followed them, transformed society, normatised practises, behaviours, identities and perceptions. Even on a scientific level these technologies have impacted methodological practices and theoretical perceptions (Ward, 2014; Bösch, 2015). The beginnings of media, as pointed above, were quite modest and it took a significant amount of time until it truly took off and became what it

is today. One of the causes for this is that literacy levels in the 1400s were abysmal, and for a significant part of history the press was controlled by the ruling class. It was not until 1605 that the first newspapers appeared and it was only during the mid-1800s that they reached significant 'mass audiences as a result of price reductions and of the development of advertising; the latter was a source of significant revenue for the populist press, which presented crime, corruption, and gore to eager readers' (Ward, 2014:22).

Systematic theorisation within sociology that focused on the significance of the press and the media that accompanied it only began with the implementation of the radio. The radio became a mass medium together with films as the world was finishing with one world war and heading towards another. This is of significance, because during this time the hegemonic power media text and content has on social discourse and views was truly highlighted. Films moved from being novelties, short clips that excite the audience, to multi-faceted medium used to tell stories and send messages. The early twentieth century showed that by implementing these factors in media they could be engaging to people and that they could reach a large part of the population. Through these tactics one could also distort or inflict doubt about certain historic events or about certain values that are socially upheld. One example of this can be seen with the D.W. Griffith's film *Birth of a Nation* (1915) which features strong racist and sexist imagery and themes 'that many white Americans found quite appealing during the upheavals of industrialization and urbanization' (Ward, 2014: 27). The storyline of this film shows how gun violence is used to remove the threats to the patriarchal colonial order which in this case are feminists and black people (Curiel, 2014). These messages were accepted by many who held distorted views about historical events in regards to the position of black people and women, which resulted in furthering and promoting phobias towards certain groups. Even from the initial stages, academics had begun to notice that the politicisation of media had an impact on its audiences. As the types of media available grew, it became evident that they are a powerful instrument in influencing mass consciousness and aiding political goals and interests (Benjamin, 2008).

With the dawning of the 60s, a new medium started to make its way onto the public scene. During this time, due to the ever-evolving technologies and innovations, theorists began to refer to a *mass* media as the communication that occurred through these mediums began to address a mass audience. In regards to this,

media theorist Marshall McLuhan (1964), postulated that each medium carried out their own unique effect on the social sphere. He went on to argue that different types of media have very different effects on society or, as his famous maxim states, "the medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1964:3). In other words, society has undergone significant changes and has been influenced more by the medium itself rather than content and the messages it conveys. A good example which captures the impact media has had on society is given by Anthony Giddens right at the beginning of his chapter on *Media* where he states that in 1865 it took 12 days for the news, that US president Abraham Lincoln was assassinated in a theatre in Washington, to reach over the Atlantic. In 2001 as the Twin Towers in New York were beginning to be attacked by the second plane 'some 20 minutes after the first tower had been struck, it is estimated that a global audience of two billion people watched the attack on television in real time' (Giddens, 2009:723-724). In today's context, news has begun to travel in real time, reaching its audiences almost instantly. In a society in which satellite television is an important part of its daily processes, looks are very different from a society in which the reigning medium is the print. McLuhan argued that as societies are more and more reliant on electronic, or better said digital media, a global village will be created that offers people the option of witnessing events from all over the globe and participating in its dissemination.

This statement seems to capture even more substance as society as a whole started to undergo certain technological and informational changes that marked the start of the era known as the 'Information Age'. This era brought forward radical changes which marked the further characteristics of this new societal form. This new age stood out and established itself through the help of the fast developing Information Communication Technologies (ICT's). Within this new established society, which is also known as the Digital Age, new forms of media were developed as a result of the evolving digital technologies. With the evolution and innovations in the field of media and technologies, social actors have completely integrated them into their professional and personal lives. Social theorist Manuel Castell (2000) argued in his work, that individuals rely, take and use ICTs and the digital media at an instinctual level, which led to the creation of a factor in one's daily life that cannot be replaced. The Internet, according to Flew, is considered to be a new form of media because of 'the technology which most clearly exemplified the properties of convergence, digital networking, global reach, interactivity and many-to-many communication, and as a

media form which has allowed its users to produce or consume content, it has marked out the difference between the technologies of the print and broadcast era from those of the digital era.' (Flew, 2002: XV). This new technology enabled the free flow of information, encouraging and enabling an exchange between the users, all by connecting a multitude of networks. By relying on its digital technological infrastructure, the Internet has become a ubiquitous element of modern life, making this information exchange and its use in developing interpersonal relationships between its users a real time activity.

The internet also brought forward intense debate in the media studies field as it enabled media to become omniscient and has managed to historicise by rendering others as old media. This cultural turn brought by the Digital age has managed in strengthening the 'awareness of communication, focusing the attention of researchers on popular culture as well as media-based perceptions and discourses' (Bösch, 2015:3). With the 1990's computers were slowly invading individuals' homes and the internet followed suit. New media, just as its predecessors, became active components, a declaration and after effect of societal development and change. At this point the concept of mediatisation was coined to be used in the process of trying to understand what the exact effect media has and its increasing penetration in the public and private social spheres and the overall social systems, and the effect it has on the process of socialisation and constant filling of social change. The turning point that ICTs announced through the help of computers and Internet-operated communication, even in its initial stages, caused enormous societal shift and development. Due to its novelty, there were many misconceptions up to the 1980s about the future of media made by media studies scholars. They postulated that, because of the nature of media, the public who consumes it will become passive in their social activities and responsibilities. Another prediction was that written and print media will disappear as the audio-visual age took off. The Digital age took these claims and provided a rearrangement of the aforementioned paradigms. The invention of the computer is the result of the contribution of many people and countries, which in itself shows 'once again that media innovations are responses to prevailing social needs' (Bösch, 2015:167).

In the current social context one can say that the internet has lost what was once its sense of novelty. Adam Tyma in this regard states that the once new media 'is no longer new. It simply is. Merged ubiquitous converged everywhere' (Tyma, 2015:13). The

Internet is considered by many academics to be the catalyst and the principal instrument which allowed globalisation to take form. The internet's ubiquitous characteristic is created by its overreaching global presence which permits the access of multiple users. Because of this, it has become what sociologists such as Terry Flew (2002) and P. David Marshall (2004) argue to be a part of the 'everyday reality of media and communication usage, with checking email or browsing the Web being no more novel or significant than turning on the television or making a phone call' (Flew, 2002: 7). Digital technology also came a long way as now there is a wide array of devices, such as smartphones, smart watches, tablets, laptops, game consoles and so on, which provide constant internet access to their users whenever and wherever they are. The mobile quality of these devices and the ability to pair with each other while still recognising one single user as the owner of all of them is what makes them so appealing. Not only that, but the information that resides on one device can be found or easily transferred to the others, also ensuring that there is a constant communication between them (Seserman, 2021). One can argue that these types of technologies and the characteristics they have are elements which 'feed directly into the performativity of mobile lives' while also facilitating the mobilization of feelings and affect, memories and desires, dreams and anxieties' (Elliott, 2016: 169).

Digital media infiltrated every aspect of modern life from the medical, educational and legislative system to individuals' everyday activities. This is especially relevant in the current state of the internet and the direction in which it is heading. As society entered Web 3.0, the artificial intelligence has reached from one's car, shopping lists, music, debit cards, to the lightbulbs of their home. It monitors the individual's internet activities at every step and it generates content according to one's political and social views. This can be noticed from the ads it generates, to the types of links one clicks on. Companies had to be quick and push their marketing strategies to adopt these new forms of media and what Benabdelouahed and Dakouan (2020) call an 'exploitation for rapid processing of this information and to better meet the expectations of users' (Benabdelouahed & Dakouan, 2020:82). They argue that, for the modern individual, the main issue is not the lack of information or access to it, but rather the lack of time to consume it all. Even more, one can argue that in the current digital scape the individual is overloaded with information and sensory stimulants that can more than often exhaust them of their energy. Attention spans have also been reduced as users seem to not have the patience or focus

to watch long videos, are dreading long articles of a certain information, and rather prefer the short video under 60 seconds, which seem to have become the new norm. Internet users do not want to wait any longer, they prefer that their requests be processed instantly, without conditions.

Kotler et al. (2017), hold a similar argument as they state that the amount of time stored for one's concentration has been reduced significantly when it comes to internet use as the average user's time spent on a piece of content has been reduced from 90 seconds to 30 seconds. The brand or influencer who reaches a wide number of users first, and manages to keep them engaged in their product or content first, will keep holding on to the user's attention. Kotler et al. (2017) however argues that in the era of terabytes this is not an easy feat, if not impossible. Artificial intelligence is one of the tools and new accessories of the internet that makes it easier to reach users who could be interested in a certain product or information. Big data has been shown to provide great economic, social and political opportunities therefore it has become quite easy to manage and use. Marketing and targeted advertising has 'opened new doors to reach in a precise and immediate way all Internet users' (Benabdelouahed & Dakouan, 2020:82). Artificial Intelligence or A.I. is often argued by scholars to be something completely different than the Hollywood depictions of it, but rather a piece of technology whose aim is to make the online experience of its users more intuitive, smarter and more integrated with the platforms that are used. A great example of how the internet and its adjacent technologies have impacted daily life and the way A.I. contributes in the integration process of the online into the offline is given by Samuel Greengard in his book called *The Internet of Things, Revised and Updated Edition* (2021). Right from the get go, Greengard talks about how he was woken up by his iWatch's vibrations, checks his iPhone to see a detailed graph of how his sleep went, puts everything he had for breakfast into myFitnesspal app, which calculates all of the calories he ate and, as he walks out the door, the smart lock automatically closes the door behind him (Greengard, 2021). He points out how through the internet he can control and record the data on his smartphone for all of these devices. Digital technologies have changed exponentially the way individuals live out their daily lives and the way they handle themselves within the online and offline environment (Lajnef, 2023).

The current technological state in which the Internet finds itself is 'a vast array of technologies and systems, including real time machine learning, sensors, and embedded systems to deliver data,

information, knowledge, and automation' (Greengard, 2021: 15). The internet is constantly growing and, as society is heading towards developments such as the metaverse, it is important to analyse the impact this technology has on social interaction, norms and behaviour. This subsection takes an in depth look at how this evolution of media impacted the social environment and the norms that are upheld and respected in the mainstream, especially in regards to gender. It takes a look at how the media impacted gender representations and its role in strengthening stereotypes, as well as how the public view is being reframed by the representation which are presented in mass media.

1.2.1. Internet's Impact on Social Life

Setting a tone different than Greengard (2021), Branston and Stafford (2010) begin by stating that media is not so much a thing that exists in the spaces people inhabit, but more something similar to waves that come in and out of individuals' lives. They argue that mass media is also a source of pleasure which is constantly present throughout one's waking hours. They state that more often than not, media and the technologies following it are taken for granted, which leads to many people seeing it as an enjoyable and everyday factor of their lives. Because of their accessibility and their omnipresence in everyday life, individuals have come to learn their codes and to be able to interpret them. The following subchapter presents various approaches to reading media text applied within the field of media studies and sociology. At this point, one might be wondering what is the relevancy of these pieces of information in the scheme of this current book as they might not seem directly related to the subject at hand but rather a generalised exploration of one of the concepts. In order to fully comprehend the details, one must look at the whole picture. Therefore, this subchapter is highlighting the fact that the significance of media technologies and their impact on 'politics, economy and culture and are an important part of free-time activity and daily discourse', on one's identity formation, considering the fact that their behaviour overall, with all their idiosyncrasies, should not be underestimated or overlooked by social scientists (Bösch, 2015:1). From its inception, mass media has been bound up with the interpretative patterns of social actors on matters of ideology and gender roles. Other areas are of course also affected, but within the current theoretical context, the points of focus will remain on gender identity formation and exploration in the realm of media.

The theoretical approaches to media take on different paths to analyse the texts and images that people consume and the effect they have on their audience, or better said in the contemporary media environment on its users. Within the digital age, the status of the audience has changed drastically. With analogue technologies, due to their static state and their relationship with the media, the audiences consumed what they were given. Whether they were active or passive in their consumption is something still debated, but one thing is certain: the relationship was unilateral. They consumed the content but could not communicate back. In other words, 'when 'old media' still reigned, media recipients had little direct power to shape media content and faced enormous barriers to enter the marketplace, whereas 'the new digital environment expands the scope and reach of consumer activities' (van Dijck, 2008:43). With the emergence of digital, the audiences found a medium which enabled their self expression of identity, thus changing their focus from the old fashioned media. This new playfield has allowed users to express their own unique take on gender and how they define themselves.

In the mid 2000's a paradigm shift occurred, with the emergence of Web 2.0 applications, in the way media content is produced and circulated. In regard to this, cultural theorist, Henry Jenkins, states that 'audiences, empowered by these new technologies, occupying a space at the intersection between old and new media, are demanding the right to participate within the culture' (Jenkins H, 2006: 24). Ordinary citizens learn how to wield this new kind of media and therefore this results in a participatory culture. This has truly revolutionised the way we consume media and information, rapidly evolving in a new universal lifestyle in which life without smartphones, social networks and other digital devices seems impossible. The new wave of user created content on the web has taken over, unleashing 'a new media universe' (Manovich L, 2009: 319). In this new universe, the audiences became users who are producers not just of media content, but also of the construction of their own identities. They accomplish this by engaging with readily available digital tools that enhance the creative process by giving options never available before. By easily constructing a new identity when creating a 'gaming avatar, when writing on their personal blog, or when publishing personal information on a SNS (social networking site), the user is interacting with the representation of oneself' (Herenwall P, 2012:38). This aspect is further explored in the next subsection of this book.

One elementary aspect of that transfer from the analog to the digital is that of representation and whether media content, be it digital or otherwise, is a loyal mirror of reality. The concept of representation is an interesting aspect to explore as users will choose to consume and produce the content they think best represents them. As it was presented in the first section of this chapter, social actors choose elements of themselves based on the social conditioning and process of socialisation. In this sense media, and especially the Internet, plays a key factor in this process. From a sociological point, the concept of representation refers to several aspects. The first one is connected to the fact that regardless of how some media products seem realistic or convincing, in truth, they are nothing more but a re-presentation of the social world and not a clear mirror of it. The second aspect captured by this concept is that the broadcasting, printing, posting of certain images, stories and situations over and over again 'can make them seem 'natural' or familiar – and thereby marginalise or even exclude other images, making those unfamiliar or even threatening' (Stafford & Branston, 2010:106). Those who control media production by using hegemonic tactics, establishing certain situations or standards to become familiar settings, accomplish what social researchers call black holes of representation. This makes specific behaviours be according to the mainstream ideological setting while others are stigmatised or othered. The third aspect of this concept plays with the question of whether the exposure of certain groups or contexts are continuously shown in limited circumstances, then how does this relate to the public perception of these groups and their expectations of them? This is also related to the 'world of political representatives: people who 'stand in' for us, take crucial decisions with real consequences – as union or school or government representatives' (Stafford & Branston, 2010:106). Representativeness has also shown to be essential in regards to encouraging girls in choosing careers in STEM fields. Studies have shown that girls chose to go on and work in computer science fields if they had a female mentor or teacher (Sengupta-Irving & Vossoughi, 2019; Tam et al., 2020; Wieselmann et al.,2020). This subject is related to the importance of representation of gender which was explored and analysed in the previous section.

These arguments indicate that media within sociology is often seen not as a simple mirror or a glass window towards the real world, but rather as essential parts of the modern social landscape. They often seem invisible, as elements of background noise, as the day goes on but, as shown, they have a palpable impact on the way

people act and speak. With the implementation of ICT's, media went through a process of fragmentation under which traditional formats have undergone an evolutionary cycle and are continuing to develop into fragmented offerings. This process is something through which the consumer and the content also go through an evolutionary process in regards to user interactivity and their ability to personalise content and media products as they will. In a similar fashion to analog media, the online landscape has gone through its own evolutionary process and it turned 'into a robust information space that provides both marketers and consumers an outlet for efficient, timely communication as well as entertainment, information seeking and commerce' (Bright, 2011: 35). Due to media fragmentation, many of the traditional and physical formats have seen a decline in circulation. Especially since the pandemic, the circulation of DVDs or Blu-Rays has decreased drastically as streaming services have become more popular (Canales, 2021). The shift towards digitised and integrated media is ongoing and the internet itself becomes a medium which can converge and offer its users what they are looking for, at any time and in any place they choose, at their convenience.

The internet can be compared to a rhizomatic system that extinguished all physical geographical limitations, which created the opportunity for people from all over the world to engage in social actions. The development of software, and even whole platforms, for the purpose of making computer mediated communications (CMC) more accessible, eliminated the previously set boundaries for human interaction and enabled self exploration. This extended reach and usability was also made possible by the technological developments which allowed the switch from an analog format to a digital one. Adopting a digital format presented vast opportunities in regards to storing, delivering, receiving and processing information, by encoding elements of old media, such as sound, text, images and video, in single binary codes of ones and zeros. Marcel Castells (2000) regards this switch as the catalyst that launched the societal change and therefore established the new network or information society in which the impact and effects of its development and implementation are continuously persuasive, cumulative and still visible in the present context. At the same time when digitalisation began to take hold and integrate itself within the social fabric, another paramount element of the network society was also undergoing the same process.

Convergence is closely associated with digitalisation and is an element which is intertwined in the base of the digital information

collection and discharge. Therefore, in this sense, when talking about conversion it is closely referred to 'the bringing together of the computing, telecommunications and media and information sectors' (Flew, 2002:7). According to Flew, in this context, convergence is split into three distinctive parts which are responsible for various areas of digital communication and information distribution through an array of hardware which is necessary for the whole completion of the digital process. The three parts of convergence are known as functional convergence, industry convergence and convergence of products and services. All of these different levels and focuses of convergence occurred in the span of decades and they are still occurring in certain instances. In regards to convergence, what stands out is the fact that the switch from old analogue technology to digital did not take place in a smooth and linear fashion and the dispute between the two can still be noticed. Nevertheless, in the words of Adam Tyma (2015), 'what started as a small ripple, as all other media forms before it, changed the very fabric of how we communicate today' (Tyma, 2015:11).

This convergence process, the impact digital technology had on the interaction processes and what is considered the norm has undergone significant changes which are still developing. The evolution of cyberspace/digital space can be used as a pertinent example in this case, as the manner in which it is used is also reflective of the society's relationship with it. Web 1.0 was mostly 'a static information dump where people read websites but rarely interacted with them', while Web 2.0 was distinct and it was mostly acknowledged as 'an interactive and social web, facilitating collaboration between people' (Nations, 2019). The three parts of convergence become especially clear in the Web 3.0 stage where the individuals' whole environment captures a smart technological quality and benefits from artificial intelligence. Web 3.0 captures both main features from previous stages of the digital environment, but it also brings forward its specific features. One of these features is the ubiquitous presence of the internet in an individual's life through the implementation of devices which are compatible or give constant access to it. From smart houses, shops and workplaces to smart watches, phones, tablets, laptops and virtual assistants such as Alexa, the line between the digital and the analogue has become blurred. It is difficult now to completely separate and distinguish the two spaces as they have a constant impact on each other and together they shape the individual's sense of reality and inner experience. The second distinct feature of Web 3.0 is the implementation of the algorithm of artificial intelligence in one's web

use and social media accounts. Through the use of new algorithms, artificial intelligence collects data on the user and their activity online and charters content based on their preferences. This can be observed when engaging in a simple Google search or when scrolling through one's social media feed. (Nations, 2019)

Therefore, considering how communication happens today, and scrutinising the related communicative act, new questions emerge in regards to the effects that the individuals experience while having a constant online and connected life. Professor Sherry Turkle was one of the first social scientists to call into question and to explore the implications and impact of CMC on the individual and this dual spaced existence. Turkle applied an autoethnographic tool to collect her findings and her 'conclusions presented a reality where we could live through multiple screens, unlocking our societal potential' (Tyma, 2015:11). This is especially appropriate and fits the current social context, but it is also further supported by claims, such as the similar arguments which aligned perfectly with Turkle findings which were 'extending from The WELL (an online community that argues for the positive potential of computer-mediated realities)' (Tyma, 2015:11). Computer Mediated Communications is a phenomenon that encapsules all forms of possible digital communication, which includes apps like Whatsapp and Lime, email services and various platforms of social media. The main points discussed in this chapter revolve around social network sites (SNSs) and on how the individual enacts their carefully managed image of the self, by creating content and interacting with other users, through platforms like Youtube, Facebook, or Instagram. danah boyd and Nicole Ellison (2008) has defined social networking sites as being 'web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system' (boyd & Ellison, 2008:211).

boyd and Ellison's definition, although it is still accurate and relevant, is in a sense outdated as within Web 3.0 the content present on one SNS can easily travel outbound to another platform. It is also possible to connect between them and multitask the content production on the respective platforms. For example, if one connects or allows Instagram to have full access to their Facebook profile then the same photo or video that was uploaded and made public on one of these platforms, will also appear on the other. A similar merger is visible between Youtube and other Google features (email, drive, photos etc). These factors further reflect the ongoing,

complex and nonlinear process of polymediation. Polymediation is important for the researcher because it highlights the "outcomes of convergence and fragmentation", while including the ceaseless evolution of the relationship between digital "technology, the sites of mediated communication, and the process of communication" (Calka, 2015:15). Because of the fact that they offer a wide range of technical features that are useful in the construction and maintenance process of one's profile, social networking sites can be considered a proper stage for a performance, as the user has all the necessary tools to "type oneself into being" (boyd & Ellison, 2008:211). Therefore, through polymediation the user has access to all the basic features that enable users to properly model and perform their sense of identity. Some of the most paramount characteristics of polymediation, concerning identity performance, are '[u]biquity, shape-shifting authorship, the simultaneous fragmentation and merging of identity, and division/communality' (Calka, 2015:15). In the polymediation equation, ubiquity does not only capture the widespread quality of the digital space, but also its accessibility and overwhelming presence in everyday life contexts which allows the dual existence of its users. Due to ubiquity, one can argue that as an individual and cohort experience of the digital space, a point of saturation has been reached regarding the use of social media sites and their constant presence in modern life. Their presence has led to changes concerning the manner in which information is sought, consumed and understood, and in the way individuals 'connect with others and maintain relationships, while also providing some opportunities for distraction' (Calka, 2015:15).

1.2.2. Theoretical Paradigms in Media

The literature concerning theoretical frameworks focusing on human–computer interaction has an extensive part which focuses on the role of human users in the digital environments and on their respective behaviours. In this regard, Mantovani (1996) offers a social context framework in which there are three levels of interactions concerning the communication and cooperation process between social actors and computers. These levels of interaction are split in the following manner: the first level starts from social context, then goes to specific situations in the second level and finalises its process in performative aspects of a certain task which resides in the third level. (Lee & Malcein, 2020). In other words, the behaviour users perform in using ICTs such as computers and carry on certain tasks can be influenced by an array

of factors at all three levels. In a similar line of thought, Bishop (2007) brings forward a framework that looks at the various ways to describe people's online behaviours when it comes to their posting habits, content construction and participations on online platforms and in communities. Bishop also offers three levels concerning human- computer relationships and interaction.

The first level provides a detailed presentation of user's actions on social media platforms such as posting content, the second level is the process through which the individual goes through in taking certain actions (i.e., the decision to post a certain photo) and finally the third level is the manner in which they react in actually taking a certain action in the online realm. In Bishop's first level, there is a very specific focus on the individual's desires, wishes and intentions. To be more precise, the first stage refers to CMC activities on SNSs that can be socially orientated, fuelled by personal interest, or they can be specific to the nature of the online community one participates in and the messages that roam around in it. The second closely looks at how the user carries activities that are influenced by the goals, values and belief system they have, while the third concerns itself with the users 'sensory abilities, such as the sense of hearing and visual images' (Lee & Malcein, 2020: 6). The social context framework takes the social actors' online behaviour and performances, in regards to the inner workings such as their interests, goals and beliefs which directly influences it, and provides the necessary tools for one's performance to be assessed in a positive manner.

Another theory that captures one's attention when studying the effects of digital media on the behaviour and the way one develops in an environment with oversaturated media messages is media richness theory that provides a certain framework in attaining a better understanding. Similar to the social context framework, this media richness gives a perspective that can be used as an aid in the process to further the understanding around human and computer interaction and its effects on identity and behaviour formation and performance. Developed in the mid-80's by Daft and Legel, media richness theory began to gain popularity alongside the evolution of mediated communications such as the email. (Ishii et. al., 2019). This theoretical concept suggests that the effectiveness in which a medium should be used needs to be matched with the richness of said medium and the equivocal task at hand.

The theory also offers a guide in approaching the basic nature of CMCs (Lee & Borah, 2020). It presents the possibility of ranking media platforms based on the richness that they offer, which is

decided based on their ability to how well and how close they are to emulating face to face communication. Derived from an objective perspective of the characteristics media offers its users, media richness theory pinpoints the use of a certain medium as objectively set. When looking at the way people use digital media in performing identity and acting out behaviour, media richness refers to the format in which the communication and user experience is presented (Moran et. al, 2019). This theory positions platforms on a spectrum which are dependent on four dimensions.

These dimensions help illustrate whether platforms are enabling '1) immediate interaction; 2) the use of various cues, e.g., texts, images, graphical symbols, physical presence, gestures etc.; 3) focus on personal interests; and 4) communication with natural languages' (Lee & Borah, 2020:58). A media platform that encapsulates a generous range of these dimensions is considered richer. They also allow a display of the complex impact that media richness has on the users' experience and activities on said platform. For example, when engaged in online performances or communication through direct messaging, by receiving multiple cues and prompt feedback, the perception of an enhanced social perspective is limited when it comes to detecting any trace of a possible deception (Tseng et al., 2019). Receiving immediate feedback provides the user with the perception of a possible prediction of the manner in which the media in question will be used in the future. Having the feedback to be personally focused on the individual allows an enhancement of social value and provides the opportunity to focus on developing self expressiveness. In this sense, social media platforms which provide these characteristics are scarcely described by some scholars as being lean. Exhibiting the capacity of creating a similarity to real life experiences, rich media platforms differentiate themselves from lean platforms by integrating the four dimensions and ensuring a holistic user experience.

Social media makes it a reality for the individual to upload versions of themself and to create an identity which becomes the message they send to their audience. A complex message is produced by presenting a personal outlook which is 'always evolving, never perfected, endlessly rehearsed, iterated over a lifetime' (Hartley, 2012:194). Adding and engaging with social artefacts, such as make-up, fashion, accessories and location, the body becomes directly involved in delivering the message which the user intended to communicate. Symbolic interactionism is one of the theoretical paradigms which inquiries about the individual's self and body presentation within the media environment. There are a multitude of media studies which have adopted interactionism as

their paradigm. One of these studies was made by Herbert Blumer in the 1930s. Herbert's study aimed to illustrate the impact films had on their audience. Cinema began to be a staple in everyday society during that time and Herbet began to equate the type of influence media had on social actors. He 'asked 1,500 American high school and college students to record their experiences of watching films in 'autobiographies', presenting these in his book, Movies and Conduct (1970 [1933])' (Giddens, 2009: 752). Since Herbet's study, the media environment evolved and integrated individuals into it. Interactions, the body, the identity, have all become messages which are communicated in a digital environment. Social media platforms have become spaces similar to Habermas's salon culture (Qi et al., 2018) or a marketplace where gossip and exchange of information occurs (Roese, 2018).

This paradigm offers a difference in the process of understanding the evolution of the type of interplay individuals and communities go through in the frame of institutional and social structure. This structure adds significance and symbolic power as meaning through this interplay is created and as these meanings and symbols created by action become interpretations and representations of events. These particular events created by interaction can lead to social and personal change of the individual's performance and interpretation. This creates the necessary space for a process of constant and dynamic evolution of the coordination and role taken by the individual. When ideas and information are presented, be it in offline or online environments, a similar process occurs as they are transformed into objects utilised in maintaining and growing interaction. These then go on to become a social reality and fact for those engaged in this process (Lundgren et al., 2020). The symbolic interactionist paradigm is an umbrella term for a wide selection of theories that can be applied in studies, such as the one presented. Out of all the theorists, Goffman's theory of dramaturgy or presentation of the self is by far the most used in relation to researching the individual's interaction and identity development on the social media platforms (Qi et al., 2018). By providing his dramaturgical metaphor, Goffman gives the necessary tools to develop detailed insights for the user's expression of identity and exploration of social interaction, conceptualising everyday life as a stage on which actors take on their social roles and perform the expected behaviours and identities. The social participants that engage in the performance are split into performers and audiences. In this setting, actors perform their assigned parts, which are influenced by the social context they are in, presenting what they

presume to be the most attractive and desired qualities. During this performance the audiences judge what they see and decide if the social actor is presenting a credible level of authenticity and discipline (O'Leary & Murphy, 2019).

Goffman argues that self performances take place on two stages. The front stage, on which all public interactions and role presentations take place, is seen by Goffman as being lacking in regards to the authenticity the social actor portrays. The backstage, in this sense, is considered to show a more true or honest self, as the actor can relax and reflect on their performance. These theoretical aspects can capture a wide net of activities and behaviours within the digital space. Dramaturgical theory receives a different light as, with social media becoming a norm in the daily activities of an individual, personal branding and self censorship become aspects which need to be considered and applied. Now individuals need to use the digital tools they have at their disposal and market themselves to their audience. If this practice during the analog days of media was a practice reserved only for public figures, in the contemporary context it is a task all individuals, to a certain level, must abide by in their digital participation. In this sense personal branding is a presentation of certain characteristics of the self, meaning a performance of identity (Jacobson, 2020). This perspective is also expressed and described well by Turkle (2017) as social media is seen as a space for 'us to represent ourselves in simplified ways [afterwards being put in the position in which we are] faced with an audience, we feel pressure to conform to these simplifications' (Turkle, 2017:185).

It has become apparent that the use of social media and CMC has become amalgamated with the complex processes and systems that reside in the performance of identity and thereby consumed by the online audience (Morelock & Narita, 2021; Jacobson, 2020). CMCs give individuals the ability to create what they deem a positive representation of who they are, or at least want to seem that they are. It may appear, at a first glance, easier to control and manage than in offline spaces of interaction, but it also comes with its own challenges as good control over digital literacy and software abilities are necessary. Social media sites give the opportunity for the individual to be selective about their identity and their self performance, selection which aids them in presenting their character in a positive light (Bazarova & Choi, 2014). On these platforms one of the most used and important formats or tools used for self presentation is the photograph (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). Once, photographs were taken with the intention of creating

keepsakes or to materialise a certain moment, while now they have become part of the message. The use of memes and different types of photos have become a usual activity in the process of communicating with peers. Although there is little academic exploration on the subject of using photographs in the social media context and the use of them in communication practises it has slowly become a popular subject of inquiry as the phenomenon has increasingly spread.

Photographs are also used as an instrument in performing on social media platforms. As digital media developed, so did different types of visual media used in the process of creating the body in cyberspace. These settings provide the necessary materials to 'modify their self-presentation to appear more favourable to strangers, however, they are less pretentious with friends as they already know much of their background information' (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019: 4). Visual media are used to better but also manage self-impressions and this shows that CMCs have become something that is purposely used for this goal. McQuarrie et al. (2013) use the dramaturgical theory to analyse and describe the impression management and presentation of the self done by bloggers. They state that blogging can be seen as the 'apotheosis of Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor', as it is considered to hold capacities in creating various personas which are foreign from their initial presentation of the self, and as such, bloggers are afforded with the capacities to develop personas far removed from any previous presentations of self (McQuarrie et al., 2013: 140). Because of this blogging is seen by some academics to be something, to keep close to Goffman's metaphors, more akin to a dress rehearsal as the practice of blogging in itself enables the social actor to allow their audiences to lay out their own taste to the wider range of people. The end goal for these practices is to gain and accumulate more recognition and therefore various forms of social, cultural and financial capital (McQuarrie et al., 2013). By imitating, or better said simulating, a similarity and a common ground with their audience they can 'deploy self-deprecating language when describing their physical appearance, bad habits and embarrassing moments' (O'Leary & Murphy, 2019:85).

1.2.3. Becoming Digitised

The impact mass media technologies had on social life and on the inner workings of social structure cannot be overestimated. When aiming to understand the way individuals develop beliefs about

themselves and the world around them and how that affects the way they perform in social settings in regards to the meanings that ground the prevalent norm system, the elements that grab the child's attention from the early socialisation process must be thoroughly explored. Media has become an overly present element from the early stages of life. If in the prior generation the parents somewhat controlled the first stage of socialisation, in today's context that is highly influenced by the media one consumers as well. Children, even as young as two, know and already have the necessary digital abilities to grasp the meanings of certain symbols and use applications such as YouTube on their own. This, as shown above, impacts greatly the way individuals interact with others and how they interpret the world. This is especially true in regards to gender identity formation and performance, as social actors take the artifacts which are assigned to them or at least what they are told to be assigned to them from the childhood and learn behaviour associated with the sex in order to give a credible and disciplined performance. This argument is also supported by the post-modernist perspective brought forward by Butler's introduction of alternative concepts regarding performativity and agency, where she 'frames identity as a continuous process of becoming as opposed to an ontological state of being' (O'Leary & Murphey, 2019:86). As society is becoming more and more digitised and traditional gender norms are contested, questions of how the younger generation travels through this space and how do they manage and construct their gender identities within it arise. The following subsection of the literature review of this book takes a more niche view on the main cause of inquiry concerning gender performance within the digital media space and the development of youth's identity in the current social digitised environment. Youth Identity Development in the Digital Era

Empirical social research regarding social media platform use found that people are engaging with these platforms with the goal of presenting themselves in a more positive light than their offline character representations. These aspects tend to be more poignant and fastidious when it comes to the manner in which young people use and integrate social media in their daily lives. Within the digital space the user's identities become more 'imaginative than their true self' (Qi et al., 2018:8). Social media platforms introduced to their young users the necessary new tools to engage in self expression and to facilitate their image. The online presence people develop in general seems to be customised for their audience (Cunningham, 2013) in which the content is viewed by a public across multiple platforms in which they spread likes and reshares. These elements are the most

paramount for the construction of the personal brand which has become a necessity for all users, not just a certain demographic (Papacharissi, 2010; Schwartz & Halegoua, 2015). By embedding analogue mediums, such as text, photos, video and audio in digital settings, it provided individuals with new versions of self expression. For example, the 'relatively limited and short messaging style, coupled with easy categorization of a theme through a hashtag (#), allows a presentation of cultural, social, and political interests in a consistent and visible manner' (Qi et al., 2018:8). This option is also integrated by Instagram, although it is a more common practice on platforms such as Twitter, and it permits its users to make connections and communicate certain messages with others, regardless of their geographical position, or if they are known or have any type of previous connection. These techniques make it more challenging, but they also make it possible to present a version of the constructed self in a manner that is representational of the user.

The internet went through multiple phases of development and in each one of them the way individuals interacted and created their online identities in different manners. In their research on identity development Davis & Weinstein (2017) describe this evolutionary process by presenting a series of witty illustrations which portray the cultural highlights that can aid scholars in their exploration of identity performance on SNSs. These illustrations were done in an extensive span of time capturing both the beginning, the Web 2.0 and the current state of internet use. Created by cartoonist Peter Steiner and published by the New York time in 1993, the first illustration presents two dogs which are having a conversation. The cartoon shows one of the dogs sitting in front of a desktop computer while the second dog looks at them with curiosity. The two dogs are talking and there is a caption that reads 'On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog' (Steiner, 1993). The 90s were the first wave that provided scholars with the opportunity to study the online possibilities to play with identity. Boundless new space for identity experimentation and performance was created due to the option of creating an anonymous presence (Turkle, 1995). This is the basic concept which is referenced in Steiner's (1993). The dog could play with various aspects as their identity remains without the other user's knowledge of their true nature. This lack of knowledge allowed the users to play with elements of their gender identity without any reservations concerning social retaliation and exclusion because of it. Coinciding with Turkel's views, Stone (1991) and Waskul and Douglass (1997) also 'wrote about how the disembodied nature of online identity directly facilitated exploration' (Davis &

Weintein, 2017:4). Stone is the author who pointed out that the fluidity of gender which is shown through a form of digital crossdressing, through the use of an avatar which is a digital depiction of the body, began to be implemented. In 1994 the virtual meeting space known as WorldsChat was created. In this new space users could create digital versions of themselves and spend time in 'a shared space station-themed virtual space that was designed for social interaction and personal creativity' (Olivetti, 2020). On this subject Damer (1997) wrote that this new digital environment allowed people to put on a digital suit – also known as an avatar – to which they had full control in designing, and gave its users the ability to travel the space and communicate with other inhabitants.

Waskul and Douglass (1997) in regards to these new processes and customs of identities construction – which they also describe as cyberselves – state that they were a result of the characteristics given by the internet at the time. Because of the context in which communication occurred, users became faceless and anonymous beings. During the incipient stages of the internet, whether one adopted a more authentic self to their real life persona, or created something completely different, was left to their own device as, at the time, the virtual with the physical did not correlate. The anonymity and facelessness offered people the chance to indulge in expressing their disembodied selves without any inhibitions (Waskul & Douglass, 1997). Regardless of this new found freedom and tools in engaging with dramatic explorations of one's identities Davis & Weinstein (2017) pinpoint that research points an overall to consistent envisionment of the self in accordance with the offline representation. This consistency of representation and online identity performance with the offline is something that pushed the practice of anonymity only to certain areas of the internet. As within the next stage of the internet, customs and practices show a slow mirroring of the offline space.

The second stage of the internet presented in Davis and Weinstein's article is illustrated through the cartoon created by Rob Cottigham (2007). This one also uses two dogs as its primary subjects and it presents them in a similar setting with the previous drawing. Only in this case, the dogs have upgraded their ICT from a desktop to a laptop and, as they look at its monitor, one of the dogs states that only a limited number of people really know that they are a dog while the rest can have a limited access to their profile. As social media platforms began to collect mainstream success and make their way into everyday practices in the early 2000s, the users adopted a different attitude towards online identity exploration.

SNSs at the time permitted their users to connect to other individuals' profiles and to form a sort of digital link, that in a sense resembled somewhat of an acquaintance, but most of the time remained limited to that space. Regardless, this did create the opportunity for building a bridge between the two realms and people began to carefully curate their online personas by creating personal profiles. This practice became even more pronounced with the rising popularity of Facebook, as the basic concept of this platform was to transfer the "true" self from the offline to the online, where one could connect with all their friends and acquaintances. As Wilson et al. (2012) put it in their article, Facebook has become an astounding online ubiquity. This characteristic seems to be expanding as Facebook changed its name to Meta and is focusing an impressive manpower on developing the Metaverse (Roose, 2021). When it was launched in 2004 it was seen as an enormous success as millions of people signed up and created profiles. Soon people's offline friends became part of their online lives and the space became an extension of the social playground where they engaged in communicating through their physical symbolic representations. With this, the previous characteristics of the cyberself came to a halt and the social rules and norms which governed the offline became transferred in the digital environment. As Davis & Weinstein put it 'existing friends expect their friends' online identity representations to be recognizable, familiar, and consistent with offline behavior' and if this new stage of the internet brought any benefits to identity performances and expression of the self then it can be underlined that the advantage of the opportunity for individuals to be more closely connected 'with friends from offline life is that digital disclosure and communication can enhance closeness and strengthen peer relationships offline' (Davis & Weinstein, 2017:5). The cartoon created in 2015 by Kaamran Hafeez continues to play with the similar conceptual visual as the previous two, meaning that it depicts two dogs, who are looking at a computer while one tells the other a witty statement regarding internet citizenship. In this case, one asks the other whether they remember the time when nobody knew who they were when they went online. This statement reflects the current state in which internet identity development is residing and also the direction in which it is heading. As social media platforms such as Facebook, begin to extend and acquire other social media platforms, such as Instagram, playing with identity has become something more constrained, compared with previous stages of it. Fewer opportunities of identity play appear available in the current digital

space as both the online and offline spaces began to merge. This aspect also made way for the development of a plethora of applications and platforms which ensure the anonymity of their users such as Whisper; Insider and Reddit. Still, it has become undeniable that the digital is interwoven with the physical, and the type of online identity one performs online affects their relationships and reputation offline.

The direction in which this interaction and performance of the self seems to be going is towards the metaverse. This term is used to describe what is believed to be the next stage of the internet and the full emergence of the physical within the digital. On Facebook's (now Meta's) `about` page they proudly state that the 'metaverse will be social – 3D spaces in the metaverse will let you socialize, learn, collaborate and play in ways that go beyond what we can imagine' (Meta, 2022). Inspired by Neal Stephenson 1992 novel called *Snow Crash,* this new digital space is presenting a synthetic digital environment directly linked to the physical, as its name itself implies one's transcendence into the universe. Similar to the scene presented by Stephenson in his novel, the metaverse is a digital universe that exists parallel to the offline world, in which users interact and engage with each other through the help of avatars. In a way, the basic concept is similar to that done by WorldsChat in the 90s, although they were a modest version of what this space is set to become. From the beginning the metaverse set out as a "computer-generated universe' which has been described through a long chain of conceptual visions such as '*lifelogging* [2], *collective space in virtuality* [3], *embodied internet/ spatial Internet* [4], *a mirror world* [5], *an omniverse: a venue of simulation and collaboration* [6]' (Lee et al., 2021:1). This new digital environment promises an overall ecosystem that contains and includes all the cultural, economic, legal and social norms that reside in the offline environment. These aspects are said to be for the benefit of the public as it aims to facilitate and encourage digital content creation. Through the avatars, users will be able to create digital products which will be linked to their physical counterparts (Bush, 2021). Because of this future of coexistence and interoperation between the metaverse and the physical realm, the avatars which represent the users' digital forms of identity, will be able to have heterogeneous experiences in 'real-time characterised by unlimited numbers of concurrent users theoretically in multiple virtual worlds' (Lee et al., 2021:2). Within these virtual worlds content creators can use this quality of interoperability to transfer and distribute the same work across worlds and platforms. By using technology such as the Microsoft Hololens, which uses AR technology

to integrate the two environments, the user can co-exist in both realms and travel throughout virtual worlds. Games such as Roblox already offer a somewhat experience of what this metaverse will be like and highlight the potential of the world hoping with the same avatar or creative content from one world to the next (Grieves & Vickers, 2017).

It is clear that digital technologies and social media platforms have created the new ways in which individuals think about themselves and the way they choose to present and perform their identities. They also changed the requirements for daily social activities such as work and school, as digital abilities and literacies have become a necessity and 'considered a keystone for the development, quality of life, and well-being of people, especially of children and adolescents (UNESCO, 2016)' (Festl, 2020: 2). These changes especially had an impact on the youth and their development of self, as being in contact from a very young age with digital technologies and growing up with them had an essential role in their socialisation and norm implementation. Concerning this aspect, in his book called *Behave. The Biology of Human History at Our Best and Worst*, Sapolsky (2018) discusses the biological and neurological developments that take place during the period of adolescence and the repercussions it can have on their social and psychological development. He argues that what sets apart an adolescent from childhood and adulthood, from a neurological point of view, is the lack of a developed frontal cortex which becomes fully developed in one's mid-twenties. Sapolsky goes on stating that it is this process that makes adolescents 'so frustrating, great, asinine, impulsive, inspiring, destructive, self-destructive, selfless, selfish, impossible, and world changing' (Sapolsky, 2018:155). This is a period in life in which a person seeks the new, takes risks and finds their tribe. It is also a period that marks the further stages of identity performance and development.

As these digital transformations have an intrinsic impact on societal practises and normative behaviour it is important to further explore the impact it has on the younger generation, as this period of life is essential to a person's own interpretation of the self. Posting stories on Instagram and uploading a short clip on TikTok have become for some youths daily pastimes, and the great majority consume and spend time on these sites daily. These social media platforms are seen as great motivators which tempt and encourage their young users in activities of identity exploration as well as constant connectivity. The online realm comes with its own risks and opportunities in regards to identity performance as well as

overall protection of one's data. Compared to generations before the 90s and 2000s when taking a picture with friends had a limited audience which pitched in that performance, for teenager, after and especially in today's context, a picture 'may be seen—now and years from now—by much larger, more diverse audiences, some of them intended, others not' (Davis & Weinstein, 2017: 2).

1.2.4. Teenagers' identity Development in the context of Social Media

An analysis done by Kepios (2022) showed that since the beginning of January 2022 there were 4.62 billion social media global users, which translates to 58.4% of the total world population. Focusing on each social media platform of interest individually it can be seen that since October 2021 Facebook has reached over 2.9 billion monthly active users that go on the platform regularly and engage in their online activities. This makes Facebook the most active social media platform in the world, with 66% of these active monthly users that login daily. Out of this number 43.5% of users are female while 56.5% are male. This difference in gender percentage is postulated as being due to the fact that, around the world, men are 'more likely than women to have access to the internet' (Kemp, 2021). Instagram follows strongly behind Facebook with 1.478 billion active monthly users ranking as the 4th most used social media platform in the world, being taken over by YouTube and Whatsapp. In regards to gender differences the situation is similar with that of Facebook, meaning that 48.4% of global users are female and 51.6% are male. A stark difference between the two platforms, although they and Whatsapp are owned by the same parent company, is that on Instagram the oldest age range of users is between 25-35, while Facebook is seen as a more attractive platform by a wider age group (Kemp, 2021). This implies that Instagram is seen as a more attractive space for identity presentation practises by the youth. It is also worth mentioning that for most social media platforms – e.g., Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and so on – the minimum eligible age to sign up for an account is 13. Meaning that children younger than 13 cannot, and should not, have a social media account (Easy Fix Pro, 2022; Instagram Help Centre, 2022; Diwanji, 2021; Serrate-Gonzalez et al., 2023). A similar statistic in regards to social media use has also been found on Romanian territory, where Facebook also reigns as the most popular social media platform, with over 89% or 11.6 million people of the overall population

having an account. In regards to Instagram, the number is more modest but still considerable as 4.8 million of the Romanian population have an account (Statista Research Department, 2022).

These numbers are also reflected at a European level as according to Eurostat, in 2018, 89% of households within the 28 EU countries have access to and engage in frequent use of ICT's, and therefore the internet, which occurs both at an individual and household level (Eurostat, 2019). This is quite similar to the American context where, according to Calka, around 85% of American households are connected and are in frequent use of ICTs. Regarding these statistics, Calka argues that most Americans 'spend more time on social media than any other Internet activity, averaging thirty-seven minutes per day' and she states that if most of one user's internet activity and time is spent on social media, it raises questions regarding the effects it has on their perception of social reality and the impact it has on their performance of their identity (Calka, 2015:16). On the ubiquity of digital media, Erik Erikson (1968) added that the population segment which is most affected by any kind of technological or ideological change is represented by teenagers. In his own words Erikson argued that 'as technological advances put more and more time between early school life and the young person's final access to specialised work, the stage of adolescence becomes an even more marked and conscious period and, as it has always been in some cultures in some periods, almost a way of life between childhood and adulthood' (Erikson, 1968:128). Erikson (1950, 1968, 1980) believed that the most complex process of identity development takes place during adolescence. Or better said, although individuals undergo multiple changes and development throughout their lifespan, the most paramount stage which has identity development as a central task is that of adolescence. The process of identity development is depicted by Erikson (1968) as an ongoing disruption and struggle between two categories, known as identity synthesis and identity confusion. Adolescence is seen by him as the period in a person's life in which a social and psychological moratorium takes place. The term psychological moratorium is something that pops often in Erikson's work when it comes to the stage of adolescence and it refers to the fact that youth, at this point in their lives, begin to explore and to disregard their responsibilities in the favour of their search for obtaining or defining new identities (American Psychological Association, 2022). This process is strongly based on the information the youth receive from the people in their community, which includes family, teachers, school mates, friends

and so on, when they perform new versions of themselves. This process aids teenagers in deciding which aspects of their new found identities should they keep or should they eliminate from future performances. This inner process, Erikson argues, is seen as being paramount when it comes to the establishment of a moral and value system as well as any potential goals one might form for their future. During this stage teenagers can undergo two types of identity procedures that are known as synthesis and confusion. According to Erikson, in order for youth to form a well balanced identity they are required to manage the conflict between the two procedures successfully and that by doing so they will acquire a state of 'self-sameness and inner continuity' (Erikson, 1968:50). The opposite result will be noticed in youths if this conflict is left unresolved which could potentially lead to them experiencing 'the fragmentation and instability associated with identity confusion' (Davis & Weinstein, 2017:3). Adolescents use this period of their lives in order to manage this conflict by engaging in different socialisation processes with the social entities and agencies that matter to them (Davis, 2010).

Erikson's arguments are also backed up by statistical data released in a report by Eurostat called *Being young in Europe today* (2016), which showed that 91% of European youth used the internet on a daily basis and that 83% use mobile platforms to access the internet when they are away from home. What this research keenly points out is the fact that European teenagers use and spend an enormous amount of time on digital devices. This increase in digital media consumption has also led to an observable decrease in more traditional forms of media, such as television. The internet presents itself as an auspicious terrain with multiple platforms and tools – such as 'video streams, chat rooms, blogs or social media' – which 'provide a place for young people to share their experiences and to exchange their views' (Eurostat, 2019). This research also brings forward the fact that the presence and use of ICTs among children, teenagers and young adults is widespread and therefore, in some instances, it has reached the point of saturation. Due to the fact that the youth are more susceptible to adopting and implementing new technologies, they possess a higher literacy and skill rate in handling ICTs than individuals from previous generation, 'and it seems likely that this pattern will continue for future generations with young people likely to remain at the forefront of adopting new technologies (be these hardware or software/services)' (Eurostat, 2019). Therefore, it is pertinent and appropriate to focus both epistemologically and empirically on

better understanding the dual presence and performance of teenagers.

Within sociological studies teenagers are looked at from the perspective presented above. Meaning that they are seen as individuals that are at a crossroad between childhood and adulthood and that are highly concerned with their place in the world and the type of identity they should adopt. They do not place themselves in the grand social context in which they traverse, but rather their main concerns are related to their immediate cohort and community. According to Thorkildsen and Xing, online platforms such as SNSs are spaces which gain immense traction by providing youth with the space they require during this period, as they discover and explore various sides of themselves. Thorkildsen and Xing went on stating that these platforms offer the youth the illusion that they are distancing themselves from social norms which are followed by previous generations and that they manage to engage in different practices that are niche. This illusion that the authors talk about comes in the form of 'advertising opportunities for self-expression and asking members to build profiles that depict their personal attributes, hobbies, and intentions' (Thorkildsen & Xing, 2016:117). With this in mind, it can be said that social media platforms (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube and so on) are viewed as important tools in the process of youth gender identity formation in the digital space as they provide the users with the instruments that are needed in order to achieve such feats. They also offer the space in which they can perform their online identities, communicate with others and consume different types of content. The online environments that are created by social media platforms offer users the opportunity to develop their own online communities in which they are able to 'socialize or exchange information and opinions through pictures, postings, blogging, and other tools to communicate with one another' (Vista, 2015) (Klein, Ahlf & Sharma, 2015:322). Usability and sociability have been two main characteristics of social media platforms, as well as their goals in what they strive to provide their users with. These idiosyncrasies are highlighted in the fact that users have the freedom in becoming both the consumer and the producer of online content (Sledgianowski and Kulviwat, 2009; Pagani et al., 2011; Heinrichs et al., 2011). In other words, the actor can be both the performer and the audience while being present in the digital context. The aspect of usability is one that is extensively discussed in academic work as it focuses on the technology and the manner in which it is implemented in the lives of users. The manner in which technology

is utilised by the masses, in the context of social impact and the change it causes, is seen in the ease with which the device or software is introduced in their lives and used by them on a daily basis. On the other hand, sociability refers to the ease of communication, information distribution, interaction with others and the content they produced. Scholars such as Panzarasa et al. (2009) and Klein et al. (2015) 2015:322 state in a similar fashion that 'the ties between the users are established and maintained by their communication, i.e., the greater the communication between users and their friends in a social network, the greater the strength of ties between them' (Klein et al. 2015:322).

The previous statements provide an appropriate amount of information that indicate the overall ubiquitous state of the internet, especially in the current stage of development. The Internet offers users a wide range of opportunities such as providing their users access to information at any given moment they decide to go online, and it provides the digital field that ensures interaction between users. The ubiquity of the internet has also impacted the way individuals communicate and interact with each other and the behaviour that one needs to adopt in order to be considered polite. This aspect is pinpointed in Calka's work where she argued that the youth find it rude if they do not receive instant answers from those they communicate with online. Therefore, due to its ubiquity and polymediation, the internet has created the expectation that everybody is instantly reachable and present in the digital environment constantly. Calka buckled down further and stated that "that one of the biggest societal shifts with mobile phones was the ability (and indeed the expectation) to call a person directly, not to call a location and hope the person might be at the location" (Calka, 2015:16). Because of this there is a constant expectation from individuals to always be able to reach or to know about the whereabouts and happenings in one's life through the help of social media platforms. Instagram and Facebook have become the main online grounds in which people post about their life and keep up to date with their online audiences. It is due to its widespreadness that digital media and implicitly social media networks highly affected and influenced the way in which individuals interact and relate to one another. Social network sites have become a space that intersects with offline reality, a place where users communicate and distribute information with other individuals or groups of people that are already part of their social network. This, combined with the amount of time spent 'on social network platforms, means that we are not just consuming media messages, but actively creating

and sharing our own messages and in the process, performing the self' (Calka, 2015:16). Leary and Tangney also adhere to this argument and go on stating that the self is more of a complex umbrella term rather than a static stand alone concept. They go on claiming that there are multiple selves in one single person, such as self-evaluation, self- conscious, self- esteem, self-awareness and so on. Baumeiter (1998) also holds on to similar statements that there are multiple topics and subtopics that can be found interwoven in what is considered to be the self. These features that contribute to the manner in which one's own identity and awareness is formed, make way for the ability of self reflection and exploration, which contributed to the formation of the versions that are presented in public environments. Concerning the self that is presented in online settings, it can be said that it is developed and shown to others in an idealised way, focusing on presenting a hyper polished version, built around cultural cues and aimed at creating feelings of envy from those who consume their performance. With the online tools at their disposal on social media sites, users create a profile and post content of themselves by engaging with various media formats – i.e., video, photos, text – creating the desired message and posting it for their followers to see. With the digital environment encapsulating more and more of modern daily life of both agencies and individuals, several theoretical concerns emerged in regards to the position of the individual, of their body and sense of self in the dominating cyberverse. A theoretical perspective regarding the self

The self, from a sociological perspective, is a concept that was brought to the attention of other scholars by Charles Horton Cooley in his instrumental work called *Human Nature and the Social Order* (1902) in which he also foreshadowed the ideas and theoretical basis of symbolic interactionism. As presented in Nathan Rousseau's work called *Self, Symbols and Society* (2002), Cooley's most important contribution to the study of the self was his concept of looking-glass-self. This concept claims that there is no such thing as a singular, independent self-relation, but rather one that is defined and negotiated in relation to other social actors. Meaning that the way an individual sees oneself is by no means a solitary and intimate experience as these phenomena cannot develop without the influence and constant external feedback from other individuals and society as a whole. Cooley argued that 'human beings possess an inherent tendency to reach out, interact and socialise with those people and objects that surround them' and therefore their sense and performance of self is entirely based on and built in the social norms of their milieu (Rousseau, 2002:1).

One of the main founders of symbolic interactionism, George Herbert Mead (1934) expanded and further developed Cooley's theories and concepts by adding a psychological and positivist twist to them. These concepts and ideas were taken, contested and remodelled later on by Mead's student Herbert Blumer (1937), and likewise by Ellsworth Faris (1937) whose contribution led to what is now called the symbolic interaction paradigm. This theoretical paradigm captures 'the notion that the meaning of things—including the self—is derived from social interaction, the reactions of significant others, and one's interpretation of those interactions' (Leary & Tangey, 2012:2). One of the most cited theorists within the symbolic interactionist paradigm is Erving Goffman. He is especially known for his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) that provides a detailed presentation of the theory of dramaturgy. This theory offers the researcher a framework through which they can investigate the mode in which individuals try to contain a certain version of the self that they are exposing to their audience, and the process they go through in order to ensure impression management. Goffman argues that individuals or, as he refers to them, social actors have an interest in developing and reflecting on the self that they choose to present to others in social settings. Social actors try during their performances to garner a reaction for those who are watching that will serve to their advantage. According to Goffman, there are a multitude of strategies that individuals try to use in order to appear attractive when they are engaging in the process of interaction with other social actors, and to ensure that during this process they have managed to control any external impression or image others would build of them. Regarding Goffman's theory, Smith argues that it was seen by the author to be only a 'classification and conceptual articulation' to which he considered it to be 'the structure of face-to-face interaction, in the minutiae of ordinary talk and activity' (Smith, 2006:1). Though even Goffman, himself did not necessarily consider his work to be theoretically ambitious, his detailed presentation of the conceptual formation which occurs during interaction as well as the role of artefacts and the meaning associated with them provide an appealing frame for answering the research questions of this project.

Taking into consideration the arguments made above, it is worth mentioning that Goffman also looks at the factors that lead to the formation of one's self through the lens of the socialisation concept, or as he calls it, based on their milieu. Meaning that, through the lens of dramaturgy theory, the identity formation in children/teenagers is

seen to be due to the ongoing exposure to the cultural messages and the feedback their peers give them regarding their behaviour. The behaviour that is accepted and is encouraged is one that is in accordance with their 'gender, race, disability/ability, religion, sexual orientation, and class' (Rattansi & Phoenix, 1997: 127). These social constructions contribute to the formation of roles the individual will end up filling as they grow older. These roles will also offer them the framework of the type of behaviour and demeanour expected of them when they act them out in front of their audience. In other words, their behaviour and presentation of self is going to change depending on the social context and the role they have to act out on stage. On this stage, through interaction, the individual acts out their role and performs their concept of self. Smith goes on to say that Goffman's dramaturgy theory saw role as the element which produced "actors', game roles 'players', and ritual roles 'idols' and 'worshippers", that, when set in the interactive space, create the premise that 'the contrasting orientations for interactants reduce to those of information management and ritual' (Smith, 2006:99). In his work, Goffman sees the dimension of the ritual as being perceived as a decisive factor in structure and system in which interaction must take place in regards to specific contexts. The ritual is deemed highly important because it is the factor that cues the actors during their performance about the amount and type of information that should flow, and sets the rules regarding the level of considerness one must show for their audience. In this sense, it can be stated that social actors rely on the ritualising setting in order to know the type of moral character they need to uphold during self- presentation. Within the digital setting, the users must be aware of the ritualistic setting related to that specific space and post content that hold the moral considerations that they have accustomed their followers with, as following short of that standard would provoke their scrutiny. Content production is as important as impression management in physical social settings and the user must be aware that the type of content they chose to make public might have undesired reactions depending on their audiences. Through this it can be understood that moral obligations are applied in the most minute details of interaction and, due to that, it can be stated that morality 'is not something that is diffusely located in 'society' but is rather mediated and renewed in everyday social encounters' (Smith, 2006:100).

In connection to this theoretical perspective that Goffman offers, in her book *It's complicated (2014)* danah boyd explains a situation which can provide more context and palpable social context. She specifically recalls a situation that involves a teenager

and the impact their online identity performance had on their offline life. danah goes on stating that the moral standing of the teen was brought into question by a board of admission at a college in the US, after their social media profiles were inspected. The youth had written a very good personal essay which left a lasting impression on the board, but once they did the online background check, they were shocked. As they found the youth's Myspace account the board saw that his profile was filled with gang symbolism, crass language, and references to gang activities' (boyd, 2014:29). Although this finding made the board wince and reconsider their decision about the teens' admission into college, boyd intervened on the youths behalf and postulated that even though the type of self that was performed on the social media platform was not one that upheld the rituals setting and fallen short on the moral standards of the context they were in, it was not necessarily the case for the youth day to day context. At times certain depictions of the self are required to be constructed and presented in order for the actor to be able to navigate scenes that might not truly fit with their ideals. To use her own words boyd stated that 'this teen was probably very conscious of the relationship between gangs and others in his hometown' and that 'he felt as though he needed to position himself within the local context in a way that wouldn't make him a target' (boyd, 2014:30). Considering this aspect one can argue that offline moral expectations have managed to successfully travel in the online space as well and set similar ritualistic settings.

1.2.5. The cyber-body

The virtual space pushed society in a setting where all of the geographical boundaries of the offline world disappeared and users, regardless of social criteria, became in a sense world explorers. Through the process of digitalization and the development of SNSs, new types of geographies were formed and with them users began creating a new type of body which allowed them to explore. This new body is viewed and named in different ways by sociologists. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) called the digital body as being one without organs, which can be constructed through digital tools and which can persist over time and outside of organic factors which rule the offline realm. On the other hand, Donna Haraway, in her essay called *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) sees the digital body as a cyborg. In Haraway's words '[a] cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction' (Haraway, 2001:1). Haraway goes on to state that

social reality is formed by interactions between social actors, the predominant ideological political constructions and world-changing fiction. These elements were also uploaded into the digital realm where individuals transfer versions of themselves. This space, due to its virtual quality, draws in and immerses the user completely by offering an array of sensations.

Within the virtual environment there is support and space provided for the fragmentation of identity and for its performance in 'a multipurpose theatre-in-the-round for the many components of the self' (Hillis, 1999:164). Hence it is due to its quality of being able to merge one's embodied perception and the externally received conceptions which lead to a sensory stimulation of the users that attracted the academic and social scientific gaze towards the theorising and analysing the concept of the cyborg, as presented by Haraway (1985). Mark Dery (1993) further fastens this argument by setting that due to the increase in new media's ubiquity of technologies that are connected to machine learning software, individuals are constantly adapting and transforming into 'cyborgian hybrids of technology and biology through our ever-more-frequent interactions with machines, or with one another through technological interfaces' (Dery, 1993:564). In relation to these arguments, one can postulate that digital technologies are affecting the body in numerous ways, as it is put through a process of deterritorialization, desynchronisation and multiplication within the virtual environment. Rodney Jones (2011) expostulates that the most paramount effect digitalisation has on the body is that it makes it mutable, editable and more prone to one's figment of imagination and vision. Through the digital technologies and within the virtual space, the cyborg is not simply captured within their compounds, but rather it launches a complex set of processes which facilitates the anticipatory function of the virtual body. These facilities and the space they unravel in 'has created for people new opportunities to engage in self fashioning through narrative projects using digital tools' which make it possible for the users to engage with it and take on 'projects that allow them to articulate important moments in their lives, to reflect on life's trajectories, and to reposition themselves as agents in and authors of their own stories' (Jones, 2011:337). The goal of the virtual body, or of the cyborg as Haraway proclaims it, is to help the user create and visualise an idealised version of themselves. Individuals have control over their own narrative on social media and can curate their image as they seem fit and appropriate.

1.2.6. Culture, subculture and post-subculture

Cultural tools are in essence charged with symbolic values that harness meanings which guide interactions and social settings. Every object and artefact at the individual's disposal, including their own body, receives a meaning and symbolic value and therefore becomes a cultural tool used to support and guide interaction. Norris and Jones set out to uncover this very aspect in their own research. Meaning that they wanted to implement a paradigm which was mediated to pursue a deeper understanding of the method in which youth construct their bodies in the digital environment by using the mediated tools that are set at their disposal (Norris & Jones, 2005). To capture the full extent of mediated tools by teenagers in their online activities and self development, Norris and Jones adopted the concept of mediation. Originally coined by Vygotsky, this concept was constructed to represent that the mediated process is the cause and catalyst that launches the individual's thoughts and actions. Vygotsky argued that depending on the cultural tools that are used there a series of different actions that are ignited and makes way for behaviours and thoughts. He thought that mediation provides the individuals with the tools needed to control certain elements of human activity. He went on to further his claims by stating that 'inclusion of a tool in the process of behaviour ...alters the course... of all the mental processes that enter into the composition of the instrumental act (and) re-creates and reorganizes the whole structure of behavior' (Vygotsky, 1981:139–140). These cultural tools that he is aiming at can attain both a physical – i.e., any type of physical object – and psychological – i.e., any elements that contribute to interaction, such as verbal and body language. Concerning this aspect, Jones stated that, when it comes to investigating the youth online identity formation and the interaction they engage in, the research must take into consideration both aspects of the mediated concept and of the cultural tools (Jones, 2001). It can be said that it is required to adopt a more introspective position when the research is engaging with cultural tools of a psychological value, as such a position might prove useful in the process of analysing what were the incentives that led the youth to post certain photographs or other types of media materials. Concerning this aspect, Jones states that when it comes to cultural tools, their true essence is one of semiotic value and yet 'they exist simultaneously as objects in the world and in the minds of users as mental representations imbued with meaning' (Jones, 2011:323).

Culture is seen, in works such as Jones', as being an entity of its own. This implies that culture manages through the information, meaning and symbols that it holds, both the group and the individual from multiple points of view. An individual personal perspective of the social reality, as it was presented in the previous subchapters, is highly influenced by the culture they reside in. Culture functions as a guide that provides the individual with the necessary tools to navigate the social realm, be it in the physical, or in the digital, and to construct one's identity according to cultural standards. Unlike the physical realm, the online space provides a lack of situational context and space. This aspect makes it difficult to adjust the performance according to the audience, but at the same time provides more freedom in expression. Eglinton states that when it comes to the impact of cultural tools and the contextual space in which identity is performed, there is a certain mix between the interaction that takes place between social actors and the lack of concrete geographical space. They go on to postulate that, when youth go online and engage in performance practices, they do not simply reproduce and attempt to reconstruct the places, cultural and gender practices but "the mobilisation of aspects including history and individual experiences in and through an always unique local–global nexus that leads to the (re)construction of new cultural forms – including new places, figured worlds, and identities" (Eglinton, 2013:40-41). Aligned with this thought thread, George Gerbner's (1998) cultivation theory fits perfectly. This theory claims that the constant or repeated exposure over a long period of time to mediated content would have an effect on rationalising and on the intellectual processes which are used to enact social action. This point of view is also in alignment with Gramsci's concept of hegemony, which presents the way cultural tools and meanings are established and enforced through mediated messages and long exposure to them. In the beginning, this theory was tested by Gerbner and his colleagues in regards to the effects of television and how it shaped the thought process of individuals. In 1967, Gerbner and his team came to the conclusion that 'over time, the mediated message slowly changes the audience member's perception of reality' (Tyma, 2015:8). These effects can also be observed within digital media and through the rise of "influencers", who are users with a big audience following their activity, and their online posts have a trend setting effect and also influence the consumer patterns of other users. Still, it is too much to assume that the media has complete end control over their users, its influence being rather

moderate and it takes a long time to make considerable change in the public's perception.

Teenagers use digital products and their activity within the online space to perform, by implementing various cultural tools, which leads to them developing their own unique culture that is based on 'popular cultural forms in their lives and how they resist, negotiate, and (re)produce cultural meanings in relation to local and global contexts' (Eglinton, 2013:33). Taking this aspect into account, it is needed to switch the conceptual focus from culture to constructions such as subculture and post-subculture. Scholars' focus, when it comes to studying youth, has been exposed to a complete shift towards trying to uncover extensive information about their subcultures, as with the turn of the century, the infiltration of digital technologies which became more and more integrated in global society, caused major changes in all facets of life. Bennett is one of the researchers that, at the beginning of the 2000's, acknowledged and brought forward the importance of studying youth subcultures. They argued 'that youth was, in effect, a "culture" or subculture in its own right' (Bennett, 2000:15). With this type of mindset, researchers can look at a deeper level in the practices of youth in the online realm, as the elements of subculture might be actively used in their process of identity construction and performance. Therefore, it is necessary to concentrate on specific practices done by youth and explore the various facets of their behaviours, construct of self, and the type of physical cultural tools they engage with in the process of both identity construction and presentation (Valentine et al., 1998). With the integration of a combination of both cultural and social theory in the theoretical framework, the researcher can draw a richer set of observations concerning youths' subculture and the practices they employ in their interactions. Eglinton stated that, from the teenager's perspective, subculture is 'used as a kind of classification to study youth engagement with cultural forms [that] carries with it the assumption that subcultural units are homogenous, bounded groupings of young people' (Eglinton, 2013:33). These statements highlight that through the presented theoretical framework the concept of culture does not have the ability to provide an explanation, or to define the continuously changing and evolving beliefs and views of youth. Adolescents are shown to have an invested interest in social and cultural debates, as well as in the current social and political movements that are concerned with social issues. The subcultures that youth develop, according to Bennett and Khan-Harris, manage to grasp the complexities that

are brought forward by globalisation and to integrate and accept the changes that digital technologies have brought into their daily lives (Bennett & Kahn-Harris, 2004). Erikson's' work on youth identity development also provides some insights about the impact and development of subcultures. He states that youth have a quick reaction to technological and social changes and to their integration in their lives and activities. This is also highlighted by Eglinton who states that teenagers have been highly active when it comes to integrating the 'interconnected global processes' and that this gave scholars and researchers the chance to develop 'new theoretical tools [that] have been considered and deployed including, for example, 'neo-tribes' (Maffesoli, 1996) and 'lifestyles' (Bennett, 2000; Featherstone, 1991), to study youth identities and engagement' with SNSs (Eglinton, 2013:34). With this in mind, by implementing a post-subculture concept, the researcher can see the youth identity as being a complex and multifaceted and not a linear developing entity. Theories based on post-subculture show that there is prerequisite for constructing research questions that cover the shifts that are occurring in the predominant culture that impacts global society, as well as focused cultures that have an impact at a local base, as these position can offer critical code that provides the platform for further change and development (Dillabough et al. 2007). The academic literature on this subject shows that youth identity formation and their subcultures are intertwined and impact each other, as well as the fact that researchers can gather relevant insights in regards to the subculture and post axis and, by doing so, they 'are putting localities, identities, and the everyday realities of youth at the centre of their research' (Eglinton, 2013:34).

The post-subcultural concept stands out because of its dual feature of containing both flexibility and a hybrid-like structure, in the sense that it exists in both the online and the offline realm. These types of idiosyncrasies offer the researcher the grounds on which they can explore both online and offline identities, while also offering the space to further look into the manner in which power struggles and materialism transgress on youth development. Social media platforms have placed teenagers as 'active producers of culture who work with/in and through the local context, using and creating meaning from cultural forms', and who apply the available virtual tools to create their own conception of self and of their interpretation of the world (Eglinton, 2013:35). Cultural production of youth occupies a central position in Willis' book *Common culture* (1990). Within it he conducts an ethnography in which he examined teens' end products, by assessing the cultural tools that they used

in order to capture their own point of view in a way that holds meaning for them. The conspicuous concepts that Willis created in his book are used to further augment the findings. One such concept is grounded aesthetic which is used to look at the instances in which teenagers use objects in a personalised manner and provide it with symbolic context (Willis, 1990). He also analyses the way youth use visual materials in order to perform identity and he 'describes a mutually productive relationship between self- and world-making through cultural production' (Eglinton, 2013:35).

1.3. Theoretical Framework: Symbolic Interactionism

To grasp comprehension of the extent in which digital technologies and social media have impacted youth cultures, and the role the concept of gender plays in this dynamic, a theoretical perspective which provides the necessary intellectual instruments for engaging in self reflexive activity is needed. The theoretical tradition of symbolic interactionism in sociology pushes into the limelight various implications regarding empirical research. George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) is one of the thought leaders and founders of symbolic interactionism and he is the one who brought forward into discussion the idea that the way one's notion of self emerges is through the type of feedback they receive from the other members of society. However, Mead's concepts and ideas had proceeded in a direction that was deemed and depicted as having a high positivist tone (Meltzer et al., 1975) (Cojocaru, 2004). This dissatisfaction leads to a general tendency by theorists to view symbolic interactionism as an interpretive approach to research and as one that tends to occupy the same intellectual and theoretical space as the hermeneutic-phenomenological tradition. Mead's symbolic theoretical perspective is still highly used and explored in sociological research as he provides a unique perspective in analysing one's self. One example of this type of social research is that conducted by Sonia Livingstone (2008) who is 'following Mead's (1934) fundamental distinction between the 'I' and the 'me' as twin aspects of the self' and sees social networking as a realm that allows the exploration of the me aspect (Livingstone, 2008:400). Meaning that, in the case of social media environment, the aspect of 'me', as it is coined by Mead, finds itself being embedded within the peer connections which the teenagers developed. Because of the dichotomous view of identity being split between the I and me, it can be observed that there is a difference in presentation of the me, who is performed in the compounds of being represented by its peer

conformity, and the I, who represents the private identity which is best known by the individual in their pause from social interaction. This perspective is similar to Goffman's dramaturgical perspective of the presentation of self being different, depending on which stage we enact it on (Goffman, 1959).

Another theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism is coined by Herbert Blumer, Mead's student, who is considered as being the one whose writing had the most influence on this tendency and view (Hammersley 1989; R. Collins 1994). Blumer was the one who coined the term symbolic interactionism and argued 'that interaction takes place in such a way that the individual is continually interpreting the symbolic meaning of his or her environment (which includes the actions of others) and acts on the basis of this imputed meaning' (Bryman, 2012:31). Blumer (1962) stated that in determining the role of social research, when adopting a symbolic interactionist theoretical framework, S/he is required to capture the processes actors engage in, in order to construct their actions. According to Bryman (2012) this statement should be appreciated as it pinpoints the close relationship that can be created by symbolic interactionism if it is used together with the hermeneutic- phenomenological tradition as they share a united antipathy for positivism and a common interpretive stance.

Blumer believed that the interpretation process is, or can be considered, the core of human behaviour. He stated that due to its position and instability, inner human experience cannot be captured with the variable system offered by positivism. Blumer saw sociological variables as restrictive and unable to capture the true essence of social action and noted that they are only applicable to specific areas of social formation which do not require an interpretative process to be understood or reflected upon (Hammersley, 1989). In other words, for Blumer, symbolic interactionism is a theoretical position which captures the wide complexities of social phenomena that is induced by the action of social actors within their milieu. For him, this theory draws the process which individuals use continually to create and live through the experiences and engage in various forms of interaction. Blumer argued that being 'structured, patterned, or stable is a reification because society, like individual actors' interactions and experiences with one another, is constantly in flux' (Carter & Fuller, 2015:2). In this structured society, not only were individuals responsible for the creation and re-creation of their experiences and interactions, but also of the social institutions that are responsible for organising modern life.

He viewed the interaction between social actors as being the creative force in the making of social institutions and therefore, 'society is not a structure but rather a continuing process where agency and indeterminateness of action is emphasized (Collins, 1994)' (Carter & Fuller, 2015:2). Hence, social institutions are seen and thought of as social habits which exert their essential attributes when engaged in common situations with active individuals within them. They are perceived and valued based on the meanings associated with them and, for Blumer, meanings are viewed as being elements that are 'intersubjective and perceived, and constantly reinterpreted among individuals' (Carter & Fuller, 2015:2). As House (1977) puts it, meanings essentially have no inherent value or significance for individuals or groups that use and confront them. Rather than that, the social actor creates and places meanings to the situations, objects and people S/he interacts with and therefore they become perceived as being holders of a unique value placed by the actor's perception of the social realm. The actor's behaviour due to this can be rationalised as being idiosyncratic and manipulated by the stock of biographical knowledge S/he possesses.

As individuals have different reactions to diverse situations it is therefore difficult to predict from previous collected knowledge on the respondent what kind of reaction S/he will have. Every situation they experience is different and unique and therefore it is impossible to encounter the exact same one twice. In order to understand and to create an appropriate image of the social actor's behaviour and experience, an interpretive approach is required. By adopting an interpretivist epistemological concern, the social scientist can capture and examine the unpredictable manner in which social behaviour changes depending on the social context and situation in which it unfolds. The patterns under which human behaviour unfolds and is performed require to be studied and investigated in their various forms of action. Meanwhile group interaction asks for an analysis of the whole participating unit and what type of activities they act out. According to Blumer, social phenomena is the result and it centres 'on the notion of independent action: human society is distinctive because of the capacity of each member to act independently' (Carter & Fuller, 2015:2). By adopting an interpretative epistemology, the researcher has access to the necessary tools and paradigms in order to examine and understand the social phenomena and the action behind it, which were launched by the individual's stock of biographical knowledge.

Therefore, symbolic interactionism is a prerequisite paradigm as it allows to form a sturdy theoretical framework which provides an in-depth exploration and analysis of the actor's inner life. The theoretical formation of symbolic interactionism, organised and created by Blumer, shows that its main premises are that, firstly, human beings behave and act in ways that are charged with meanings and they attach meanings, which are relevant to them, to the objects involved. Secondly, the meanings that are attached to objects and situations are given, or better put, they arise out of the interaction that occurs between social actors. Lastly, these meanings are not constant, but rather they become modified and handled differently depending on the situation a person encounters and the interpretative process to which they are succumbed (Blumer, 1969). These three premises contoured by Blumer are still considered by many social scientists the staple and innermost essential tenets of the symbolic interactionist thought. Yet, theorists like Snow (2001) sought actively to expand the tenets and forward the understanding and intellectual expansion of the symbolic interactionist thought. Snow (2001) stipulated that the symbolic interactionist theoretical orientation should be summarised around the four principles that he coined. The four principles he conceived are 'the principle of interactive determination, the principle of symbolization, the principle of emergence, and the principle of human agency' (Carter & Fuller, 2015:3). These perspectives, according to Snow (2001), pursue to offer the researcher the possibility of connecting to a broader array of directions and the necessary intellectual apparatus aiming to help him/her understand the distinctive tensions in this perspective.

Both of these theoretical perspectives, as they are offered by Mead and Blumer, come with valid points which would help guide this research. Yet, out of all of them, the one theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism which seems to fit the subject matter of this research best is the dramaturgical perspective coined by Erving Goffman. As Carter (2015) points out in his own research of the cyberverse, the dramaturgical perspective has proved to be highly adaptable to digital space. Within his research, Carter (2015) frames 'computer-user interface as theatre performance with personal identities (Turkle 1997; Laurel 1991), the elements of drama have directed digital dialogues' (Carter, 2015:331). Therefore, the dramaturgical perspective provides the necessary theoretical make-up in order to fully examine the performance of the gendered self on the social media stage. Erving Goffman's work emphasises that 'symbols, shared meaning, identity – all are common elements

in his scholarship, which spanned multiple decades and influenced a legion of sociologists', and it represents the influence which set him as one of the leading intellectual figures within the symbolic interactionist paradigm (Carter & Fuller, 2015:6). His seminal book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) is inspired by, and uses as a framework the metaphor of theatrical performance (dramaturgy) in order to show and describe how social actors perform their perception of self when interacting with others. In her research, Marguerite (2014) sees dramaturgical theory as a strategic positioning similar to what she calls epistemic games in which individuals negotiate social perspectives in order to control the outcome of the interaction. Goffman expresses this point best in his work, as he argues that 'in the presence of others, the individual typically infuses his activity with signs which dramatically highlight and portray confirmatory facts that might otherwise remain obscure' (Goffman, 1959:19). Meaning that the individual seeks, through his/her performance of self, the approval of the person or people they are interacting with by presenting through their acting element which would be considered prosocial behaviour.

With that said, Goffman's theory defines the individual as a social actor that actively enters different social contexts in which they perform the roles they have assigned, while being placed in the over watching eye of their observers or audiences, and strives to leave a constructive impression that will contribute to future interactions. Events like these offer the social actor the required chance in which they can gather experience and information about the rules formed by the predominant ideology and establish what is asked of them based on their gender, social standing, class and so on, within specific contexts. To maintain this illusion is seen as being paramount by the author, as the missteps in impression management can lead to the scrutiny and rejection of the audience. Smith stated that, when it comes to this theoretical framework, not only is impression management seen as an inner process that the actor can employ to analyse their performance and deduce which of its elements serve them and represent an advantage and which are not, but it also takes place even during the performance, when the individual decides what information to disclose, and edit their behaviour according to the feedback and reactions. Impression management is very palpable in the context of social media platforms, as individuals carefully curate their content before posting it, being considerate of every minute detail and depending on the reaction of those that reside in the audience to they decide if the post remains visible, or if it should be removed in order for them

to save face (Heiman et al., 2024). Hogan argues that, within Goffman's theory, the details about the role that needs to be presented depends on who is in the audience and in what bounds it is set and, due to this, it is suggested that 'most behaviour was not determined by individual-specific stimulus-response patterns but was instead guided by the norms and goals of specific settings' (Hogan, 2010:278). The two aspects that impression management encapsulates take place in what Goffman called the front and the backstage. In the front stage the performance takes place. While the actor is on this stage, the impression management occurs in the form of constant care and editing of the information they share with and the type of behaviour they present to their audience. The backstage is the place where the actor can relax and while they are alone, or with their team, and they can analyse the feedback they had received for their peers and community and prepare for the next performance. Burns highlights Goffman's fascination with using theatre terms in explaining the dichotomous process that the individual frequents (Burns, 1992).

Powers et al. (2019) suggests in their research that social media is a front stage setting that has become an ideal space for impression management, as the users have control over the curation of their image. One thing social media platforms cannot provide is the need to cater one's identity to the audience one is performing for. The identity created and performed is always done so to a wide global audience which gives very little grasps to the performer as to who is viewing their posts and profile. On a similar note, Marwick & boyd (2010) argue that the social media platforms manage to basically squeeze all possible social contexts into one, therefore making it challenging and frustrating for social actors to apply all the necessary techniques and behaviours that are needed when engaging with others, in order to manage negotiations and impressions required in identity performances as they ultimately are the key to saving face. A conception of an audience is often imagined as it helps the individual in the operations that need to take place in developing an online presence and in deciding how they should present it. Marwick and boyd (2010) go on stating that, within their own study, they observed that identities and the context on which they hold can often collapse depending on how social media users use the platform. Digital citizens use these platforms in various ways and present a singular identity constantly to overlapping and diverse audiences, making it difficult to vary the strategies essential in self-presentation. One of the strategies employed is leaving out personal information or at least concealing

it and also trying to avoid any sort of topics of discussion that could cause undesired attention or attract negativity which might cause alienation. They continue on by describing this as being the 'lowest-common-denominator effect, as individuals only post things they believe their broadest group of acquaintances will find non-offensive' (Marwick & boyd, 2010:122). The performer often imagines their audience to be people of social impact in their lives such as parents, teachers, bosses and so on, this being the reason why they consider carefully what type of information they decide to make public and what sort of post they can make usually to the detriment of their authentic selves.

Social media users have a tendency to prefer to apply methods of concealment in online environments, rather than impression management, reasoning that they cannot check the information of their audience and there is no real desire to risk the failure of engagement as they can be exposed to the wrong individual or group. This aspect occurs on every social media platform in which teenagers and young adults are constantly dealing with the possible collapsed context and invisible audiences. This argument is supported by Duggan and Smith (2016) who illustrate that regular social media users are citizens of a digital universe in which they can be connected with a wide and diverse mix of people from family members, to friends and just mere acquaintances. The network of one's friends or followers can often create a space which can lead to frustration and conflicting opinions as users just attempt to navigate these digital waters. Goffman suggested that maintaining one's identity deals with one's ability to avoid conflicts that could be a threat to the overall image presented within the specific context of the performance. For everyday life interaction, or offline interactions, as individuals receive real time feedback, be it verbal or nonverbal, the term was coined by Goffman and it is referred to as co-presence. This word refers to the interactional context in which individuals 'are close enough to be perceived in whatever they are doing, including their experiencing of others, and close enough to be perceived in this sensing of being perceived in everyday life, in face-to-face interactions, positive responses from other people' (Goffman, 1963: 17).

Goffman provides a clearly distinguished view between the different types of information one receives during conversation, such as embodied and disembodied. During the daily face to face interactions the performer picks up on the partner's bodily activity and tweaks their performance accordingly. In embodied messages the body is present to deliver the meanings it is aiming to transmit, while disembodied messages take place through the help of a

medium and require external assistance in developing the organism that holds the information. Even more, the said organism will keep hold of the information recorded in it even after it has reached its intended audience. Concerning this aspect, Morelock & Narita (2021), in the beginning of one of their subsections on their *Neoliberal Impression Management* chapter, state that these aspects of co-presence and embodiment have become even more challenging in the context of the selfie society. They go on observing that Goffman's perspective on co-presence as an element which enticed people in being embodied proximity is slightly limited to the time in which he lived. When Goffman worked on his theory it 'may have been more possible to establish a firm division between co-presence and embodiment on one side, and their opposites on the other side' (Morelock & Narita, 2021:40). Calling someone on the phone during the pre-internet era could have been looked at as being only a slight exception to the two realm division. With the insertion of social media in the interaction between personal and public sectors of social life, these aspects have become an abundance of exceptions. The majority of social media platforms provide a chat room where communication takes place without involving any part of the physical body, but regardless, the interaction occurs in real time similar to an offline or over the phone encounter. These are also known as DM which is short for direct messaging and give the user the option to send to their dialog partner audio and video clips, as well as photos, which in essence aid in creating a more organic rhythm. Although the option existed for over 10 years, the video chat truly exploded in popularity and use due to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, which pushed the entire population into the digital environment. From school, to work, to meeting with friends, and even events, were all moved in the digital environment and streamed live through the help of various social media platforms or video conference providers such as Zoom and Skype. These video chat providers manage to bring to the table of online interaction and social media gender identity performance a 'strong visual dimension, where it is even possible to simulate (or digitally facilitate) eye contact' (Morelock & Narita, 2021:40). Current academics view Goffman's concept of co- presence in the social media setting slightly different and they stepped away from the dichotomous views of interaction. This was done in order to apply this concept to the complexities of visual interaction (Bulu 2012) and it has been adapted to capture the elements of comprehending the way people spend time together in digital and offline spaces (Zhao and Elesh 2008).

In the stage of adolescence, roles akin to those held by adults become to be gained or adopted by individuals, which helps them begin to customise the identity they allow to be shown to their audience in the front stage. At this point, social actors start to work on and internalise scripts while they reside in the back stage, an exercise that will ease the front stage processes (Canary et al. 2008). An appropriate example of this occurring can be given in the point the youth experience their first part-time job, or when they are shifting stages, such as going from the classroom to their after school club meetings. Teenagers adopt personas that they pull out and present depending on the environment they navigate. Meaning that the behaviour they show while at work will differ from the one they show their parents or friends. Concerning this process, Goffman postulates that the different context that the youth is learning to manage, and the scripts they are developing, are captured by the specific space and time of their performance, and the "impression and understanding fostered by the performance will tend to saturate the region and the time span, so that any individual located in this space-time manifold will be in a position to observe the performance and be guided by the definition of this situation which the performance fosters" (Goffman, 1959:106). Goffman's stance on this aspect is also seen as an appealing reason as to why this theory is considered an appropriate paradigm to use for this research, as it highlights the method in which teenagers develop and juggle their identities in both physical and digital formats. Hogan (2010) sustains similar arguments, in the sense that, through his research he uses Goffman's theory to identify the methods youth employ impression management techniques in the digital age, as they polish and carefully attend to their content and profiles. Therefore, by adopting a predominant interpretive epistemological approach and a theoretical framework which aims at understanding the individual's motivations towards social action, researching the influence of gender identity on digital content production becomes an accessible feat.

The exploration of the available theoretical body of work regarding formation of identity in the youth in the contemporary ideological context and the impact gender can have on that process was set as the main objective within this chapter. The ubiquitous quality of the internet and, therefore, also of social media platforms has made this technology a constant element in the current social life of individuals infiltrating both the public, as well as the personal or familial sides of one's life. It is part of the social fabric, therefore it is one of the cultural artefacts which individuals take on and use

to construct and perform their self- perception. This chapter tried to especially highlight the fact that the connection 'between culture and place [as] people's individual and collective lives, experiences, histories, and, importantly, identities' are directly impacted by them (Rattansi & Phoenix, 1997:127). SNSs are used by teenagers as both the tools and the space to build their identities through the use of mediated action and cultural tools (Castells, 2004; Hall, 1996; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). Within the digital space individuals create content which attaches them to the artefacts they employ that work as both elements of identity performance and as of association with a certain subculture. These techniques also provide audiences with the necessary tools to internalise and consume the messages that are being displayed (Vygotsky, 1978). The ritualistic process that adolescents play out during their online practices offers them with the ability take the various actions that are needed during development and performance of self, but also with the tools needed for '(re)constructing various identities and (re)producing aspects of self and worlds' (Castells, 2004:7).

To conclude, identity, or even better said gender identity, within the digital environment is seen as being multidimensional, that changes depending on the factors that the youth was exposed to during the initial stages of socialisation, but also due to the roles and context they decide to take on and interact in them. Therefore, it can be argued that identity is constructed by using information and by being influenced by the multidimensional space in which it can reside while being guided by the interaction that takes place. The multi-dimensionality aspect 'can be described as intersecting permeable social spaces, which include loose knots of artefacts interpreted in roughly the same way by groups of people (Fish, 1980), as for example, the figured world of school, the figured world of gender' or the virtual space (Bartal, Pliskin & Ravid, 2019:61). Mediated action leads to the individual's inner reflexions which cause reformations and refurbished versions of the self. As mentioned before, the most important aspects that lead to this process of impression management are the social space and the peer group, or member, of the subculture the youth reside in (Castells, 2004; Meinhof & Galasinski, 2005; Rattansi & Phoenix, 1997). With that in mind, as a final statement, it can be said that in both the virtual and the physical realm, adolescents' identities are multilinear and are impacted by external cues that they receive from peers that further guide their future performances and interactions with stages they frequent (Hall, 1996).

Chapter 2

Methodological Considerations

2.1. Research Overview

2.1.1. Main Goal of the Research

The following chapter distributes a detailed account of the methodological consideration that this research took on, in order to uncover its main goal, which is to provide a detailed account of the impact that gender, as a construct, has on the way teenagers present themselves in online space – such as social media platforms like Instagram – through the use of mediated tools and visual media. Therefore, the following subchapters are presenting and justifying minutely each methodological decision that was taken during the whole project, from the reasoning behind the epistemological consideration, the paradigm, research design, sampling strategies, to details about each data collection stage.

2.1.2. Research Questions

This section of the chapter aims to provide the reader with a small overview of these aspects, with the goal to ensure that main methodological elements are easily found and understood. Another aspect that is reiterated in this chapter represents the research questions that have been initially detailed in the introductory chapter of the research. With that in mind, it is appropriate to detail that, in order to fulfil the scholarly goal presented above, the following research question have been addressed:

1. How does gender identity influence digital content production?
2. What are the motivators for teenagers to engage in online activity?
3. How do teenagers feel about new media regarding representation?
4. What social media platforms do they use and how much time do they spend on them?
5. What gender differences can be observed in regards to new media consumption? What difference can be observed in online activity behaviours between males and females?

6. How do they feel about their gender identity when it comes to fitting in with their peer group?

2.1.3. Cross-sectional Mixed Methods Research Design and Applied Methods

To answer these questions and provide an in-depth analysis of the results, a mix method methodology and design were chosen. The main methods applied in this study are qualitative, but in order to form a wider view of the population of interest and their use and habits of the online space, a quantitative method instrument was applied in the initial stage of the research. Considering these aspects, it can be said that this research has both a positivist and interpretivist epistemological consideration. Taking into account that this study is overall qualitative the interpretivist epistemological consideration is used and applied considerably more than the latter. Taking into account the previous chapter, it can also be mentioned that the main paradigm that provided the overall theoretical framework for this research is Goffman's dramaturgy theory. As the goal of this research indicated the need for multiple stages of data collection from the same sample, a cross-sectional mixed methods research design was employed. This helped ensure that the sample could be contacted and invited to participate at different points in time to the required data collection stage.

2.1.4. Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Population of Interest

The specific characteristic of the population of interest for this project, as it was hinted at in the previous chapters and is detailed in the following subsection, are teenagers. More specifically the population of interest are both male and female teenagers between the age of 15-19 years old, that are high school students of schools located in urban areas of the North- East region of Romania. These characteristics are the same for all stages of the research.

2.1.5. First Stage of Data Collection

In the initial research stage, in order to grasp an overall understanding of the subject and of the potential findings that could be uncovered in the field, an online questionnaire was applied as a data collection tool. This stage was simply done to aid the development of the design of the next two stages and to provide some insight related to the overall population. The questionnaire

was developed and managed by using Google Form, and the link was distributed to the respondents through applications such as Whatsapp, Facebook messenger and email. The questionnaire can be found in Annex 1 and it is formed out of four parts, such as socio- demographic information, use of the internet and digital devices, online activity and representation on social media. Two main concepts were used and operationalised at this stage and those are online activity and gender identity. The sample for this research were n=495 high school students (male and female) between the ages 15-19 years old. In order to analyse the relationship between variables, descriptive statistics was used. Following the guide offered by the applied research design, at the end of the questionnaire, the youth were asked if they wanted to participate in the following research stages. Those who said yes were considered for the next data collection stages.

2.1.6. Second Stage of Data Collection

In the second stage of the research, focus groups were used as the data collection tool. After the first stage clarified what is the macro view on this subject, the following stage focused on the specific aspects of interest regarding this research, such as youth views on gender and the impact it has on online content development. During this stage several topics of discussion were approached by the teens. These are the internet and its use, differences in content posted by girls and boys, personal content production, online content consumption, the effects of the online on the offline and the impact of the pandemic on online activity. The samples for this stage were collected from those who answered the questionnaire. A total of 7 focus groups were organised, which summed up the sample for this stage to be n=31. The third research stage is a photographic analysis of the visual content posted by the youth on social media platforms (Instagram and Facebook). Due to the fact that the data was collected during the pandemic, besides the first session which took place in an outdoor setting and following safety regulations, all of the other sessions took place on Google Meet. The focus group guide can be found in Annex 2.

2.1.7. Third Stage of Data Collection

At the end of the focus group sessions the youth were asked if they desire to continue to participate in the research and all of the respondents replied yes, but with that said, only 27 of them had material posted on their social media. As the number of photos

available fluctuated from one respondent to another, only a maximum of five of the most recent posts were considered, which led to a sample of 117 photos to be analysed. This stage looked at elements related to gender display and impression management factors that youth engage, while performing their gender identities in an online setting. The qualitative data from both stages were interpreted by using thematic analysis.

2.2. Epistemological Considerations

Conducting any kind of research requires a well thought methodology in order to ensure the validity and reliability of the collected data and the final drawn conclusions. This is the main challenge of any intended inquiry and its further exploration as an incongruent one leads to various forms of error and invalid findings. One way of doing this is by engaging in the detailed exploration of the existing research and by analysing its methodologies and the final results it offered. As was observed throughout the extensive literature review, the various strategies which are adopted and the instruments that are applied are multiple and quite diverse. Therefore, it is essential to explore the existing options through all the available channels. The following research concerns itself with the way in which gender identity influences digital content. In regard to this subject, the existing literature shows that some of these channels, concerning epistemological and methodological considerations, are those that are taken by feminist writers and researchers, who challenge the traditional sociological mindset when it comes to conducting social research. They do it by engaging in an approach which advocates for a conscious value-laden research and by ensuring that research, which is intended for and focused on women, will be able to be relevant and consistent to the contemporary political and private needs of women. Feminist writers such as Mies (1993: 68) have pushed forward statements that, when concerned with conducting feminist research, the "postulate of value free research, of neutrality and indifference towards the research objects, has to be replaced by conscious partiality, which is achieved through partial identification with the research objects' (emphases in original)' (Bryman, 2012:40).

This sort of mentality and approach was promulgated by the criticism social research has received for focusing on and reflecting male values, especially western white male values and experiences, as being the universal norm. Or, by engaging with the words of Dale Spender, an Australian feminist scholar who expressed her

thoughts regarding this manner in relation to higher education curricula, by stating that '[w]omen have been kept 'off the record' in most, if not all, branches of knowledge by the simple process of men naming the world as it appears to them. They have taken themselves as the starting point, defined themselves as central, and then proceeded to describe the rest of the world in relation to themselves' (Burns D & Walker M, 2005: 67). Beverly Skeggs shares a similar opinion with Spender, in the sense that both see feminist research as a useful and distinct tool, when it comes to creating new and reliable social knowledge regarding ignored categories of people -in this case women- , because it 'begins from the premise that the nature of reality in western society is unequal and hierarchical' (Skeggs, 1997:77) In other words, what both Spender and Skeggs argue is that by ignoring other groups or individuals who challenge and dispute the norm, the accepted social actor needs to set him/herself within the patriarchal, heteronormative guidelines. Eichlers (1988) is one of many scholars to suggest and argue that the most pertinent response to such an exclusion and distortion of social reality and consciousness is to ensure the participation of women in research and to work towards the elimination of existing sexist biases in order to create proper grounds for the production of objective knowledge. This began by making sure that girls and women were included and that their experiences and their voices were given the necessary platforms in social research from which they could be heard. Therefore, the notion of voice became one of the main staples to feminist methodologies. The relationship between feminism and value stems a lot deeper, and regarding the methodologies and strategies one adopts, as the feminist social researchers from the 1980s suggested, might be disengaged when it comes to quantitative methods. Feminists from the 1980s proposed the fact that 'the principles and practices associated with quantitative research were incompatible with feminist research on women' (Bryman, 2012:40). It was around this time that feminist researchers within sociology began to explore the impact and the multiple ways to interview in a way that adhered to the egalitarian values of feminism. This movement properly began with Ann Okley's, now famous and highly cited, article 'non-hierarchical' relationships between female interviewers and interviewees (Oakley 1981).

It was during the 1970's and 1980's when feminists were strongly engaged in a critique of social research's widespread 'malestream'. From a historical and traditional perspective, both natural and social sciences had the majority of their research

projects carried out by men with the primary focus on men. This type of conventional science gave way to a set of narrow results, collected from a predominantly male sample which came to represent the general, objective facts and knowledge. 'Thus conventional science had ignored the issue of gender and had ignored or marginalized women, (mis)representing women through stereotypical assumptions (for example, casting women as 'irrational' or 'emotional' in contrast to the rationality and objectivity claimed for scientific knowledge)' (Summer, 2006: 116). On this note, writers like Ann Oakley (1981) argued that the reason why quantitative methods were considered incompatible with feminist research is due to the fact that they were viewed as a research method which was tied up with male values of control. Therefore, quantitative research methods were viewed in the general setting as a form of generating control over the research subject, situation and context. This position of control helps to collect a macro observation of the selected sample, but limits and disregards the individual experience of the respondent within his/her social setting and makes it easier to describe the selected data to fit ones' research goal. Ann Oakley applies this mindset in her own research (1981: 41) where she dives into the personal experiences of mothers. In her research Oakley argued that 'conventions about the uninvolved interviewer did not stand up to scrutiny in researching women's lives' (Burns D & Walker M, 2005: 67). She insisted that, in order for women's voices to be heard and highlighted within social research, the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee needs to be non-hierarchical and the interviewer needs to be prepared to invest in the relationship with the respondent with pieces and information of his or her own personal identity.

Because of this personal deep dive within one's research, there is a need of going through an in-depth critical reflection regarding his or her assumptions about the social sphere in which they plunged, in order to avoid any misreading of the findings due to one's own sets of values and moral codes. This critical reflection is also valuable when the researcher decides on the manner and design in which the research shall be conducted. During this period, the quantitative research process was often seen as a one-way road, in which the researcher asked and received the information required from the participating respondents, while giving very little, or more often, nothing in return. Many of the feminist researchers saw this as another form of exploitation and as a strategy that did not mirror the values of their movement, which stood for a common interest and non-hierarchical differentiation

among women. The value driven feminist research gave way to a strong dislike towards quantitative research and a resulted preference towards qualitative research methodology. Qualitative methods, unlike quantitative, were seen by feminists as being more consistent and manageable according to their key values.

This overall stance regarding the whole process of social research 'came to be associated with an approach in which the investigator eschewed a value-neutral approach and engaged with the people being studied as people, and not simply as respondents to research instruments' (Bryman, 2012:40). This positioning regarding the two methods highlights the implications of the value system the researcher holds and the way they reflect on the final result. This attitude towards the feminist process of social investigation has softened and increased flexibility in regards to the applied methodology. The obsession with self-reflexivity has gone under fire by several feminist scholars, and many researchers have begun to see the viable and resourceful application of mix-methods, rather than simply relying only on one. In other words, quantitative methods are seen as acceptable, if not at times necessary in feminist research, as long as they are used in conjuncture with qualitative research methods (Jayaratne and Stewart 1991; Oakley 1998).

Sandra Harding is one of the feminist researchers who criticised the initial stance of feminists when it came to the position and methodology they adopted. She believed that the idea of being completely value neutral, lacked a deeper understanding of the researcher's needs. She also criticised the attitude towards objectivity in traditional social research and its labelling of it as masculinist, therefore as an inadequate and privileged position of those constructing social knowledge. There is also other feminist research that disagreed with the initial trend: 'Daphne Patai (1994) for example, deplores the obsession with self-reflexivity, while Acker (1994) raises questions about how the researcher can move beyond her own experience, and how if she 'bonds' with her subjects can she retain the capacity to do critical research' (Burns D & Walker M, 2005: 67). Although in regards to some elements there was substantial disagreement, feminists offered essential ground where researchers could explore women's perspective on social reality and their understanding of their gender and the oppression or prejudice that is usually associated with it. In cases such as these, Harding claimed that the researcher's subjectivity can be seen as a crucial element of the research design, which needs to be taken into account when he/she conducts the interpretation of the findings.

The movement in the 70's and 80's has completely changed the way sociologists look at, and the way they conduct social research, regardless if it is feminist or not. It has also changed the significance of gender in research and it not only provided a platform to generate social knowledge about and for women, but it also provided a different outlook at the lives of men and understanding them as gendered beings. Ramazanoglu and Holland argue that feminist research has, from the beginning, been actively engaged with methodological innovation which 'is imbued with particular theoretical, political, and ethical concerns that make these varied approaches to social research distinctive' (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002: 2–3). Through these methodological innovations this type of research aims to challenge and change the old conventional ways of conducting, collecting, analysing and presenting data (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008). Their concerns and modifications in the process of conducting research extended also to the pre-existing and applied epistemologies, which were in line with the conventional or mainstream process. They expressed three concerns regarding pre-existing epistemologies such as positivism.

The first critique they brought forward was that anything related to women's existence was largely absent from the social science domain and they argued that within sociology the main focus was channelled towards the male social universe. Even more, as Dorothy Smith puts it, sociology as a science was based on and built within this universe (Smith, 1974) and the female social universe was as such left highly unstudied and invisible. All of the female dominated social sites and elements regarding domestic and care work were disregarded and ignored. The second critique was regarding the complete disregard of racial diversity, especially of women of color, who watched as feminism, as a political movement and as an academic field, moved forward and did not create a space that spoke about their social site, nor did it offer an environment where they can speak about it.

This dissatisfaction was expressed in the 1970's in the USA through, the now infamous, Combahee River collective manifesto, which also called *A Black Feminist Statement* (Combahee River Collective, 1977), while in the UK it was expressed through a series of speeches held by women of African and Asian descent, who spoke about the invisibility they experience in public, political and academic portrayals of women and the social context associated with them (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008). The third critical concern which was discussed is over the preferred tools of research within the positivist framework. More specifically, what they criticised was

the quantitative survey and whether this tool was capable of, and to what extent it could, accurately capture the complex multi-layered lives of women. On this point Hilary Graham argues that quantitative surveys, when applied to measure women's experiences, were done with surveys that were designed especially for and on the basis of men's lives. Graham is known to have coined the provocative question in the 1980's which held the collective dissatisfaction with social sciences at the time and their lack of depth exploration of understanding of female experience: 'Do her answers fit his questions?' (Graham, 1983; Doucet & Mauthner, 2008:66).

It was this intellectual and philosophical backdrop that set the attention of feminist writers, such as Ann Oakley, on the potential of qualitative methodologies and on the potential of capturing women's experiences and identities. Not only did this bring further methodological investigation, but it also created and launched in-depth testing of the epistemological foundations. This, as we saw, began with questioning the methodologies and epistemologies that were strongly associated with conventional social science and which engaged in a strong masculinist science predominated by sexist language that was ubiquitous and prevalent. Therefore, by setting, a feminist methodology was automatically constructed by the development and the shaping of an epistemology that would fit the feminist values of research. The development of a feminist epistemology takes place in a concomitant set, as the historical emergence of the various feminist theories, which were discussed and explored in the first chapter of this book. This made way for feminist epistemology to be founded as a challenge against the traditional epistemology which was founded 'on the search for certainty and a refusal of the personal and the political' (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008:67). Regarding the creation of these feminist epistemologies, Sandra Harding (1987) has identified the following positions: feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint and feminist postmodernism. These three feminist epistemological positions have contributed to the shaping of the way social researchers view the world and the way they see and form knowledge.

Out of the three, Harding presents feminist empiricism as being a contrasting approach to the other two. These approaches fit with the idea that it is not enough to simply add women into research, but rather it is necessary to develop appropriate techniques, tools and theoretical perspectives that will aid in the process of researching for women. This again plays on the subjective or objective position of the researcher and on the fact that by adopting

an appropriate position and by asking relevant questions, one can get relevant insight of both a political and a private notion which were previously marginalised due to the malestreamness of social science's conventional method of conducting research. Feminists stressed on this from the beginning of the movement and recognized the importance of subjectivity not only of the respondent, but also that of the researcher, as conventional objective positions were seen as an exercise of abusive power due to their detached position regarding the process. Hence, feminist epistemology positions women as experts on their own life, and knowledge thereof is viewed as a coproduction between the researcher and the participant in the process. The standpoint epistemology framework is strongly connected to the Marxist grand theoretical version of feminism that claims that research is a prerequisite consequently to the political act. Due to that, knowledge is required to be produced in particular contexts and settings (Summer, 2006). This particular epistemology position stands by the belief that people, or specifically in the feminist context, women, are seen as sources of particular experiences, and as the only being able of sharing said knowledge is therefore seen as valid. Or in other words, they are the only social beings able to relate their personal knowledge of the social realm and, due to that, their experiences are seen by social researchers as being valid knowledge.

The feminist standpoint theoretical framework finds its theoretical base in the Marxist theory that relates that the concept of a standpoint is an achieved collective identity or consciousness. In other words, it refers to the idea that the starting point for a standpoint theoretical perspective is the establishment of a political achievement of a group whose social environment was formed on the basis of having a beginning filled with challenges and adversities. A standpoint is hence earned from a group's social political position and from the experience of collective political struggle which, according to Nancy Harstock, requires science and politics concurrently (Harding, 2004). Although the initial use of a standpoint theoretical perspective offers a good growing ground for collecting social knowledge, just like the initial complete refusal of positivism, it presented itself with some problems and criticism. The two main ones that were brought forward were that 'if knowledge is necessarily produced from particular standpoints, then why should women be seen as having particular access to 'truth'?' and if 'there are problems about whether there is a 'women's standpoint': as black feminists in particular have pointed out, 'women' are not a unitary category and women's experiences are fragmented by racial,

generational and other differences such as sexual orientation' (Summer, 2006:118).

As an opposing epistemological perspective to standpoint theory is the postmodernist feminist epistemology. Researchers who adopt this epistemology argue that the social categories upon which standpointism depends on, such as women, feminism and social knowledge, are not static elements. On the contrary social elements, regardless of their form, are fluid, ever changing and evolving, therefore 'making it impossible ever properly to capture experiences and identities within standpoints' (Bowell, 2019). Regarding the fluidity of identity and gender, it seems like a dangerous idea for standpoint theorists who believe that it 'puts the political power of feminism at risk and threatens the loss of the material experience of women's oppression' (Bowell, 2019). This led to the argument countered by postmodernist feminists which stated that notions or pretences of an absolute truth must be abandoned. Postmodernist feminism, rather than maintaining the illusion of an absolute truth, advocates for the recognition of the multilayered truth collected from the diverse social experiences of women and men. Postmodernist feminist epistemology has its philosophical roots in the Continental tradition and draws strongly from the philosophical umbrella of interpretivism. More specifically it draws its theoretical inspiration from the works of 'Foucault, Gadamer, and Habermas, among others, Linda Martín Alcoff (1993, 1996) [who] argues for a re-orientation of epistemological projects that can take into account the political nature of truth-claims and knowledge production and can provide resources for reconstructing normative epistemic concepts such as rationality, justification, and knowledge' (Janack, 2019).

The following piece of research has many things in common with feminist research, but it does not intend to follow its conventional value system. This research from an epistemological perspective takes on a postmodern view on gender and its effects on one's identity, but it does not resume to only collecting and taking into account the social knowledge of women, or more specifically those of teenage girls. This research focuses on including both girls and boys who are in their teens in order to fully grasp the full extent that one's gender identity has in the spectrum of the digital environment. Still, as the main concepts of this research are usually associated with feminist research, one can assume that by engaging and adapting their preferred methods, the ultimate results can be reliable and valid. By adopting methods and the appropriate reasoning when collecting data, the researcher can ensure a low

error spectrum and that his/her findings and interpretations can be seen as optimal.

Due to this argument, it only seems appropriate that the methodology applied in this research is a combination of both quantitative and qualitative. Yet by engaging in a mixed method approach, there is a necessity to motivate the need for such an application, as a research project on gender identity within the digital space asks for an inductive approach, and therefore for a qualitative methodology. Because of this setting, it only makes sense to make qualitative methodology a priority throughout this project and use the quantitative method only as an initial tool to gather the macro knowledge. Once there is an overall understanding of the sample's relationship with digital hardwares and the space itself, but also their perception of gender and the role it plays in the content they consume and produce, then the next qualitative steps will follow. As it stands, the first step of this research takes on a deductive style of reasoning and engages in a positivist epistemological perspective.

The positivist paradigm refers to the 'the study of social reality utilising the conceptual framework, the techniques of observation and measurement, the instruments of mathematical analysis, and the procedures of inference of the natural sciences' (Corbetta, 2003:13). A more detailed exploration of this theoretical framework is required in order to justify the necessity and need for this step in the research process. Engaging in a positivist approach, one can outline the clear 'natural' categories that provide an empirical verification and explanation, but also a marginal explanation of the cause and effect of the objective in question. This technique of observation also requires the use of its usual tools of measure, which are concerned with 'the use of quantitative variables, even for qualitative phenomena; measurement procedures applied to ideological orientation, mental abilities and psychological states (attitude measurement, intelligence tests, etc.)' (Corbetta, 2003:13). This methodology would, of course, allow the operationalization of the concepts which are explored and would allow a bird's eye view of the research. By engaging with mathematical analysis, meaning the application and description of statistics models, it gives way to an initial exploration of the validity of the tested hypotheses and the necessary steps and questions that need to be ventured in the qualitative stage of this research.

A highly influential research study, to this current work, is that done by Endendijk, Andrews, England and Martin (2019) who apply a quantitative methodology in order to understand what are the

influences and guides of gender identity performance. As they express it in their study, gender identity is seen as a multidimensional construct which captures the social values and behaviour, through 'new ideas, new concepts, and the invention of new knowledges comprised of multitudes, as well as through a moving away or sometimes a refusal to accept essentialized constructions of binaries, genders, and bodies (Miller, 2017)' (Miller, 2018:71). Through gender identity, individuals express how they want to be seen and understood by others they interact with in day to day practices, and therefore to have it legitimised. But, as individuals are conditioned by their cultural environment, and as they go through their process of socialisation, their gender identity can become conforming – meaning that it adapts to the main ideology of its social structures, in this case being a heteronormative view on gender – or nonconforming – meaning that individuals adopt a non-binary gender identity and they also perform it as such. Endendijk et al. (2019) looks at these gender typologies and points out that these identities tend to be highly policed by those from the social team or peer group. In her measurement of gender identity she looks at individuals, through the process of socialisation and notices that peers agree and decide together on the elements regarding front stage behaviour.

Another relevant study, which applies quantitative methods in the process of data collection in order to comprehend the impact of gender in the process of identity performance within cyberspace, is that of Wright (2018) who followed two things within her research. One of the first points of this research was to determine the influence that family, friends and media have on the behaviour of teenagers, in both the offline and online realm, which determines the pro- or antisocial characteristics of it. Another similar study is that of Endendijk et al. (2019), who also developed on how criteria set by the group of peers can influence the way in which the teenager manages the personal attitudes and trends regarding their gender identity. Thus, impression management is a skill that teenagers develop and use due to the fear of becoming outcasts or shunned from their peer group, by presenting a front stage self that aligns with the values of the group. The second question addressed by this research concerns the view of "gender as a moderation in these relationships because research findings suggest that girls are more likely to engage in relational aggression and prosocial behaviours (Crick and Grotpeter, 1995)" (Wright, 2018:5). The way gender differs from a behavioural point of view, both in the offline and online realms, was determined in this research by analysing the

aggressive or prosocial actions that teenagers engage with. Wright (2018) and Endenjik et al. (2019) managed to validate their hypothesis by showing that the results they have collected indicate that the factors that influence an individual's socialisation process, can also exert an influence on the impression management of the gender identity that is presented in the frontstage.

Although the results of these studies are valid, feminist scholars pointed out, that relaying only on a quantitative methodology leaves way for a lot of false understanding of the social realm. This means that we can easily point out a numeric social fact, but we cannot truly explain the phenomena behind a certain statistic through quantitative tools alone. Due to this situation, the main epistemological position that will be applied within this research is interpretivism. Interpretivism, according to Bryman, is an epistemological consideration which is often set in a contrasting position to positivism (Bryman, 2012). The interpretivist consideration subsumes a whole intellectual trend that included academics who have had a critical view of the application of the objective scientific model when the goal of the researcher is the study of the social world. Although the writers who are adherent to the interpretivist approach have different intellectual traditions, they share a view 'that the subject matter of the social sciences — people and their institutions— is fundamentally different from that of the natural sciences' (Bryman, 2012:28). This attitude implies that the social world is incompatible with the procedures applied in the collection of knowledge within natural sciences. The social world, in order to be truly studied and explored, requires a logical research procedure that is different from that in positivism. The research procedure within interpretivism has the aim to reflect the complex distinctiveness of humans who set themselves against the natural order of things. (Bryman, 2012)

Writers like Von Wright (1971) have seen this epistemological clash a bit different and have depicted it as being between positivism and hermeneutics. The term hermeneutics is derived from the study of theology that was imported in the study of social sciences and it is a representation of the theory and methodology of interpretation of human behaviour. What Von Wright wants to point out through this clash is the fact that, within the two epistemological considerations, the main element that is emphasised is on one hand the explanation of human behaviour, element attributed to positivism, and on the other, there is human understanding which is attributed to hermeneutics. The hermeneutic approach is concerned with the 'empathic understanding of human action rather than with the forces

that are deemed to act on it' (Bryman, 2012:28). In order to fully understand and to be able to properly explore the meaning behind the social action engaged by the sample of this research interpretivism seems to be the best approach that will aid to reach it, considering that "interpretivism functions as an umbrella term for the following intellectual heritages: Weber's notion of Verstehen; the hermeneutic–phenomenological tradition; and symbolic interactionism" (Bryman, 2012:30).

When exploring the epistemological consideration of interpretivism from the perspective of its founder, it can be noticed that Weber (1978) saw that the role of sociology as a field that rather than objectively collecting social facts and disregarding the individual's experience, it has to pursue to understand the subject process and results of one's social action. Schultz adopted but also adapted his own version of Weber's outlook. He argued that the way social action is given and received with the meanings it is charged with, is inherently different from the perspective of the social actor, scientist and observer of the way daily life unfolds. The social actor, as C. Wright Mills expresses through his concept of sociological imagination, has an individualistic way of perceiving and understanding his/her action which is mostly shaped and contoured by the stock of cultural knowledge determined by their biography. This biographically determined individual's stock of knowledge internally contains 'his experiences, his plans and systems of relevancies, the observer in everyday life can only perceive observable behaviour and has no direct access to the subjective sense of the other's actions' (Eberle, 2014: 187).

Therefore, it is not enough to claim that one takes a positivist or interpretivist epistemological consideration within their research, but rather there is a need for a paradigm exploration, available in the chosen approaches. When applying a mixed-methodology, the researcher becomes an adherent of a mixed epistemological position and therefore can offer a more interesting and wide perspective on the studied subject. Due to this attitude, this research views the two methods as complementary, rather than maintaining the conventional view, adopted by Bryman (2012), of them being antipathetic. It inherently encourages the belief that 'a 'mixed method' enables richness of understanding of phenomena through confirmation of result, extension of knowledge or by initiating new perspectives about the subject of research (Bazeley, 2004)' (Wright & Losekoot, 2012:417). On this thread of thought, as it was already mentioned, this research mostly followed and subscribed to the humanistic model of science known as interpretivism and

epistemological approaches. The positivist approach functions only as a foundation of knowledge for the qualitative stages of the research.

Within the sociological context, interpretivism is perceived as a theoretical tool that aids the researcher to grab hold of cultural discontinuities and to minimise misrepresentation of social phenomena and of the actors who produce it in their own contextualised social environment. Interpretivism argues that human beings cannot be studied in a similar manner as physical phenomena. Rather than trying to understand society from an above perspective, the social scientist needs to approach the social world by understanding people from inside it and the inner realities of its inhabitants. Dilthey, one of the ardent followers and further developer of the Verstehen theory, believed that this epistemological consideration is the foundation for, and it would contribute to, the grounding of the methodology in social sciences. Dilthey's portrayal of Verstehen presented it as a tool for cultural interpretations rather than one that focuses on the subjective process. He sees it as a theory which 'involves locating what is to be understood in terms of objective cultural meanings that constitute the context in which it occurs' (Hammersley, 2006: 133).

This research's aim is to understand the stock of knowledge that is stored and exteriorised in regards to one's gender identity and the influence it has on the process of content creation and in the choosing of the appropriate pieces that are worth posting on social media platforms. Although this study does not intentionally focus on the past ideas and concepts regarding gender and content production within its bounds, it is still viewed as an essential part in the milieu of the sociological imagination in order to grasp the full extent of development within one's biographical stock of knowledge regarding it. In other words, it is necessary to have an epistemological exploration of the past, in order to better understand the changes in knowledge and attitude in the present. Interpretivism also suggests that an actor's particular set of views also implies that the "common sense" stock of knowledge is involved in their understanding of the external but also the internal life experience. Grasping this interpretation of inner reality is the role of the social scientist who is required to attempt to find 'the historical and social sciences on a method that begins from, or tests hypotheses against, description of the external features and/or behaviour of human beings' (Hammersley, 2006: 133).

Therefore, to fully grasp and explore all of the dimensions of this perspective of gender identity and its impact on the self being

performed on SNSs by teens, a mixed methodology is being applied to the current study. This attitude is also encouraged by authors such as Hollstein (2014), who accentuates in her work the necessity of engaging with a mixed methodology and a triangulation of instruments in the process of collecting data from social networks sites. She states that '[this] interest in mixed methods designs can probably be explained in that their bringing together the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative strategies holds the promise of compensating for the respective weaknesses of both approaches' (Hollstein, 2014: 3). Therefore, this research project adopts a mixed methods research design with a predominantly interpretivist epistemological perspective, and with a positivist perspective being used as primary perspective in the data collection process. This is done mainly to explore and grasp concrete trends and attitudes held by teenagers in order to have certain characteristics and information necessary for the following research stages. To be able to accurately collect and analyse data, a theoretical framework also needs to be properly developed, as it helps guide the intellectual process. Taking into consideration the subject of this research and the concepts that are applied, the paradigm that through the literature review was deemed the most fit towards the subject matter, and which provides relevant findings, is symbolic interactionism or, more precisely, Goffman's dramaturgical perspective.

2.3. Cross-sectional Mixed Methods Research Design

Ever since the late 70s there has been an increase in use and development of appropriate research designs regarding mixed methodologies. Greene et al. (1989) highlighted this in an article where they argued that the use of qualitative and quantitative methodologies did not offer the researcher the necessary scope in order to capture a rich array of data. This lack of methodological perspective, they argued, can be covered through the use of a more diverse repertoire when it comes to both the applied methods and the overall design. Due to this, they postulate that there is a need for the overall practice to be grounded in theory, whose purpose is to guide the appropriate design and its implementation with intention. They go on stating that 'mixed-method designs are advocated and used in varied evaluation contexts for the common proclaimed purpose of triangulation' (Greene et al., 1989:255). Greene el at. (1989) presents in their work that there are five purposes for the mixed methods that they have identified which

function as evaluations, and those are: 'triangulation, complementarity, development, initiation, and expansion' (Greene et al., 1989:255).

These five purposes are related to relevant designs that can be used by researchers when adopting a mixed methodology. Triangulation is the purpose that this research adopted, as it is presented in the next subsections and chapters, and it plays an essential role in the manner in which the overall data collection and analysis process has undergone. A more detailed presentation of this purpose is offered further on in this subchapter. The choice to take on a mixed methodology was already explained and presented in the previous subchapter, as it showed that, when choosing an appropriate epistemology consideration for this research project, it has been highlighted by scholars that, when studying gender, taking on both positivist and interpretivist epistemologies might prove to be best. This is because it provides a wider perspective and understanding of the method implementation, data collection process, data analysis and interpretation. Therefore, scholars and academics encourage that, by applying both epistemological considerations, a mixed methodology is to be considered the most appropriate as it provides the researcher with the necessary tools to investigate, explore, explain or simply try to understand the phenomena that is being pursued. Mixed designs are defined by Grenee et al. as being 'those that include at least one quantitative method (designed to collect numbers) and one qualitative method (designed to collect words), where neither type of method is inherently linked to any particular inquiry paradigm' (Greene et al., 1989:255). This definition is seen to uphold by other scholars as well, and it is the one that this research also implements, in the manner that it developed the research design, as well as the emphasis it has given to each of the methods it has applied. This aspect is also mentioned by Creswell et al. (2003), who mentioned that mixed research designs offer the researchers the best aspects of both qualitative and quantitative approaches and it provides them with the ability to both generalise their results as well as to cynosure on a smaller sample and further explore the variables or concepts explored in the research's topic. Creamer (2018) also insists on this factor, as she gives examples of various studies that make 'use of multiple methods for confirmatory purposes', which are 'deeply and explicitly embedded in the way' the researchers have 'designed each of these and related studies' (Creamer, 2018:117). The previous section highlighted the fact that gender and the manner in which it is presented in the process of presentation of

self is multilayered and complex. As feminist theorists postulated that, when studing gender, diverse epistemological and methodological considerations need to be taken in consideration, the following book adopts a triangulation application of a mixed methodology.

The first step that was considered when developing this research's design was regarding the manner in which the methods are applied to the sample, from the population of interest. As this research is solely interested in the way the youth's gender identity is translated into their online personas and in the content they create, the design requires to be time sensitive, and the tools to be applied only at one point in time. Therefore, when it comes to the overall process of data collection, the design chosen is cross-sectional. Bryman (2012) states that cross-sectional designs are the most used by researchers and it is commonly known as the survey design. This is due to the fact that people usually associate this design with quantitative methodologies and methods only, such as questionnaires or structured interviews, but Bryman argues that the term cross-sectional should be the preferred one, as it captures more diversity in the methods that can be employed within the design. According to Bryman (2012) cross-sectional design provides several benefits to the research such as variation in the type of data they can collect and that, unlike longitudinal studies, it takes place at a specific time. Cross-sectional design also provides the context in which the researcher can collect and observe patterns of association from their samples. Babbie (2009) also takes on a similar stance when it comes to cross- sectional designs. He defines this type of research design as being one that 'involves observations of a sample, or cross section, of a population or phenomenon that are made at one point in time' (Babbie, 2009:133). He goes on to state that cross-sectional studies are often descriptive, exploratory or explanatory. One good example of a descriptive cross-sectional study can be the census in any given country, as they seek to describe the general population at a given time.

Concerning cross-sectional designs that are providing the framework for mixed methodologies, Zheng (2015) argues that when it comes to this type of design and the involvement of mixed methods, they are quite well suited as they provide the necessary tools of investigation and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative approaches and allow the research to make inferences or to identify patterns in the population at a certain point in time. In his research Zheng (2015) looks at the popularity of the cross-sectional research design and tries to capture the manner in

which these two are combined by researchers in their studies. Similar to Babbie, Zhang uses the example of the census to explain what the cross-sectional design entails. They argue that, rather than trying to grasp an entire population in order to gather information, it is more practical to involve the implementation of a sample that is exposed to a series of methods. The manner in which the sample is selected is diverse but there seems to be an inclination towards random strategies. According to Zheng, researchers have shown an inclination towards sample surveys that have been selected using random strategies in cross- sectional designs that come from highly diverse fields and backgrounds.

Regarding the sampling strategies applied in a cross-sectional design, Levin (2006) states that the type of frame used in selecting the respondents is chosen depending a lot more on the 'response rate [which helps] determine how well results can be generalised to the population as a whole' (Levin, 2006:24). In this sense, for studies, such as the census or any other type of study that requires it, the sample that is used is quite often taken from the entire population. In this case Levin, similar to Zheng, also argues that by adopting a random sampling technique, the researchers' results are more likely to be highly representative of the whole population. The representative quality of the sample in relation to the population is a paramount factor as it is essential in order to pinpoint that the findings are reflective of the overall segment. As cross-sectional designs ask for one of the applied techniques to be a descriptive survey, one common factor that all quantitative research projects have to tackle is related to the existence of nonresponse. Leavin argues that nonresponse 'is a common problem in wide-scale surveys; techniques to minimise nonresponse include telephone and mail prompting, second and third mailing of surveys, letters outlining the importance of replying and a range of incentives' (Levin, 2006:25). This aspect was tackled in this project by switching which sampling strategies are used first and the contact that the researcher has with the respondents. The questionnaire that was developed into a data collection tool for this research was distributed through online channels. Levin highlights in her works that cross-sectional designs are often presented in the form of surveys, therefore they hold a quantitative approach and they are descriptive. This implies that hypothesis testing is not what this design aims to do. Rather, the aim of this design is to present the findings in a descriptive manner and which are reflective on the population, subgroups or phenomena. At times, the goals of this type of studies are to find and present possible associated risks and opportunities.

This type of design has been associated or grouped more and more often with mixed methods, when it comes to the process of attaining a more detailed investigation of the phenomena or population of interest. Concerning the use of cross-sectional mixed research, Zheng (2015) found that '40% (n=31) of the reviewed articles began [...] as the explanatory sequential designs, 33% (n=26) [...] as the exploratory sequential designs, 24% (n=19) as convergent designs' (Zheng, 2015:72-73). As the presented data shows, there is a predominant predisposition towards combining cross-sectional design with explanatory mixed method design. As mentioned in the first part of this section, regarding mixed methods approaches, there seems to be a scholarly consensus that they are historically developed and advanced to help answer social inquiries in a more constructive manner than approaches that are traditionally limited to only one methodology. This is due to the fact that, by providing multiple methodological perspectives when investigating social inquiry, it becomes possible to garner better and more concentrated results (Greene et al., 2015). From the early stages of mixed methodologies they have over time evolved into tools that offer a distinct form of in depth understanding of a population or phenomena. These understandings are presented by Greene et al (2015) as being four distinct features. The first understanding is presented as being more tenable, by providing a strong validity and reliability. It also creates the context in which bias is being reduced due to the implementation of the triangulation approach that offers data from the use of diverse methods and approaches. The second understanding that mixed methods provide is more compendious, meaning that through the use of a mixed methodology researchers grasp and can present a more whole and complete presentation of the social environment they are investigating. This approach offers the possibility of employing multiple lenses and points of views that aid in the building of a clear image of the social world. The third understanding that they provide is considered to be more sagacious, meaning that they come forward with a set of new ideas or perspectives and they provide more creative concepts, meanings and interpretations. This occurs 'when findings diverge and thus require reconciliation via further analysis, reframing or some other shift in perspective' (Greene et al., 2015:33). The fourth and last understanding is seen as being one that stipulates the importance of consciousness and diversity when it comes to the value systems, positions and posture. This is done through the insertion and consideration of a variety of tools provided by different methodological approaches that are inherently built and advanced based on a different value system than the other.

Mixed methodologies offer a unique perspective to social inquiry and therefore require their own set of designs especially formed and developed to be able to support the application in the field on diverse data collection methods and epistemological considerations. The scholarly work indicates that there is an overwhelming number of possible mixed designs that researchers can adopt in their own studies. In order to simplify and offer some order to the overwhelming array of options, scholars such as Hollstein (2014) have split them in two big categories: sequential and parallel designs. Mixed sequential design is an umbrella term used to capture a diverse specific framework that can be applied within a distinct study. Hollstein (2014) defines it as being a multi-fibered canvas that permits the consecutive use of both quantitative and qualitative approaches. She argues that methodologies can be seen as stands that provide the necessary base from which conclusions can be drawn. This is an important characteristic of sequential designs and, depending on which stands are used first to collect the data, conclusions drawn based on the results from that specific method are used to set the foundation and the research questions for the next stage of the research. Sequential mixed research designs are usually split between explanatory or exploratory mixed research designs (Creswell et al. 2003). Similar to sequential designs, parallel designs also use quantitative and qualitative approaches, but the key differences between them being that these stands are applied simultaneously or in a parallel manner. This does not necessarily imply that the data needs to be collected at exactly the same time or in the same space, but rather that the results the two strands provide are not reliant on each other. Meaning that data collection stages do not require the results of the other in order for them to continue or take place. This is seen as the key reason why some scholars prefer the term parallel rather than using the term concurrent to describe these types of designs (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009), especially as even the overall results are also exposed to analysis in a separate manner and, after the individual process of analysis is over, they are exposed to meta-inferences processes.

When deciding on what type of design this research project should receive, the work of Creswell (2006, 2017) was used to guide the process and establish the appropriate framework. Studying gender, especially the way it contributes to identity formation and the impact it has on self performance, comes with several challenges due to its complexity and multifacet structure. Because of this, mixed methods designs seem to be the most appropriate

route to take when it comes to the overall framework in which the data collection methods are applied. This decision was even more accentuated by Sloan and Quan-Haase (2017) who argue that the use of a mixed methods design is considered the appropriate take when one engages into research that has inquiry related to social media platforms. There is already masses of data related to the concept of gender and the impact it has on identity development and even in the way it guides online self performance. This research takes on all those elements and provides an in depth explanation and interpretation of how gender, as a social construction, contributes to the manner in which youth see themselves, and the aspects they consider when constructing digital content. More specifically, in the case of this research, it looks at the way youth construct photographic content that they choose to make public on their social media platforms. In order to obtain a more detailed and overall view of the manner in which youth utilised the digital space and their overall content creating and consuming habits, an online questionnaire was considered an optimal method that could provide a base for future more detailed and inquisitive methods. Due to this stance, and by consulting Creswell's work, it was decided to adopt an explanatory sequential mixed methods design.

Explanatory sequential mixed methods design is, as it was presented above, one of the strands that belong to the sequential designs category presented by Hollstein (2014). Explanatory sequential mixed methods design stands out due to its structure as it applies quantitative methods first and afterwards, based on the collected results and its subsequent analysis, it is decided on what the qualitative phase entails. The qualitative phase in some studies, and in this one as well, is ment to deepen one's understanding regarding the main inquiry and 'further elucidate the results obtained by the quantitative analysis [while the] quantitative strand can also lay the groundwork for selecting and locating cases to be examined more closely by qualitative means (so-called "mapping"; e.g., McLean 1998; Wong and Salaff 1998; Hollstein 2002)' (Hollstein, 2014:15). This aspect is also present in this study as the overall emphasis is set on the qualitative methods rather than on the quantitative methods, as the latter functions as only a descriptive tool in establishing a map of the field and phenomena of interest. This type of design offers the researcher the freedom and flexibility in deciding when and how the other stages are going to take place or even when they are gonna take place. It even helped guide in regards to the manner in which the sample was selected, as Creswell stated that in order to succeed in explaining the

'quantitative results in more depth, then it makes sense to select the qualitative sample from individuals who participated in the quantitative sample' (Creswell & Creswell, 2017:305). This step was taken in this project as well. The intention here was to expose the sample to various methods in order to gather in- depth data regarding the studied phenomena.

Although, according to Creswell, this approach is for researchers who are more quantitatively inclined, it was still adopted as it provided the necessary ground for the qualitative methods that were applied. Due to this, the first stage was coined in a cross-sectional descriptive manner, one that does not seek to infer but rather to explore and describe what the findings were. A cross-sectional explanatory sequential design is basically in essence still an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, as it is defined due to the use of quantitative methods in the initial phase of the research and is followed in a sequence with qualitative methods. This type of design is in general used by scholars in order to ensure that they have covered as much ground as possible and that they have covered the potential weaknesses that appear when using only one methodological approach. Within this design there is the necessary ground in which researchers can seek any potential contradictions or gaps that might arise when conducting the quantitative methods and stove to conquer them in the following qualitative stages of the research. Therefore, when looking at the overall design of this book, it can be stated that it applies quantitative methods first and afterwards, in a sequential manner, it applies the quantitative methods that consist of focus groups and photographic analysis of the youths' Instagram and Facebook profiles. The overall data is of unequal weight as the emphasis is sent on the qualitative methods rather than on the quantitative ones and the data are connected as it is due to the results of the quantitative method that leads and guides the creation of the focus group guide. The results of the focus group is what aided in the formation of the questions that were asked in the process of the photographic analysis and the manner in which the analysis took place, as this stage served to answer and fill any potential gaps left by the previous two stages. The results from each stage are analysed in individual chapters in order to allow the reader to fully comprehend each stage individually and afterwards in the discussion and conclusion subchapters and final chapter, where they are brought together and analysed as a whole. This whole research employs three methods: one quantitative and two

qualitative, which as it was mentioned in the beginning of this subchapter, implies the use of triangulation.

Triangulation is defined by Bryman as being 'the traditional view that quantitative and qualitative research might be combined to triangulate findings in order that they may be mutually corroborated' (Bryman, 2012:633). At this point it might not seem any different than any other mixed methods approach, but in this sense, what triangulation allows is the use of multiple methods that are in essence quantitative or qualitative approaches. Meaning that, through triangulation, the scholar can apply more than just one method that belongs to either of the two approaches. Jick's 1979 article is widely referenced, even by Creswell (2006) himself, when it comes to the role of triangulation in mixed methods research. In this article Jick sees triangulation, in a broad sense, as being basically the combination of research methods used to study and understand the same phenomenon. Originating from a military jargon used for navigation and strategy in order to use multiple geographic points to locate the exact position of an object or target of interest and its overall geometric and mathematical principles, it implies that through it an individual can use multiple points of view to investigate their subject of interest in order to have greater and more precise accuracy (Jick, 1979; Smith, 1975; Cojocaru, 2004a). This mindset was integrated within social sciences and scholarly research as it provides an improved accuracy of the judgements and interpretations that arise from the collected data which is collected through various approaches, and focuses on the same population or phenomenon. Triangulation is therefore seen by many academics as being a cross validation tool for the data collected in a mixed methods design. Jick states that this implies that researchers who are involving multiple methods in their projects are expected to use them in order to explore multiple dimensions of the same research problem. This aspect is fulfilled in this research as the main research questions are put under investigation through the use of multiple methods.

Regarding this aspect, Kadushin et al (2008) argues that triangulation is a form of "diverse testing," but there has never been clarity over what triangulation is supposed to contribute to as a method of diverse testing, and as a consequence, triangulation has "not . . . lived up to its expectations" (Miller and Gatta (2006:597)' (Kadushin et al., 2008:47). They argue that this is due to the fact that when it comes to the implementation of triangulation in mixed methods studies, there is a palpable lack of concrete guidelines regarding the necessary steps that would provide a frame to the

proper application of it and the interpretation of the data. They go on stating that there is a need to show that the concept has been attributed the correct indicators that are later collected in each of the applied methods, and any possible latent concepts are then also measured and investigated within every method. There is a need for correlation when it comes to the methods that are applied, as well as appropriate reasoning for each of the steps taken. With these in mind, the overall goal of obtaining more accurate results and interpretation of the data is more plausible than when exposing the phenomenon with just one method and approach. Kadushin et al. (2008) provide an appropriate statement when they argue that triangulation 'will achieve a better estimate of the error inherent in any measurement both within and between the methods' (Kadushin et al., 2008:47). Therefore, it can be stated that triangulation serves in this project as both a direct contributor to the analysis process, but also as the element that allows the building blocks of the methods that are employed in order to study the phenomenon and the impact it has on the population. Similar to Kadushin et al. (2008) triangulation is used within the sequential mixed methods design to aid in the process of explanation and forming one's understanding on the subject of gender and its role in identity formation and self presentation in the online sphere.

The cross-sectional mixed methods design provides an extensive platform which allows a sequential discussion and intense investigation of the researched topic or topics. This design has been proven especially effective in collecting relevant and valid data in cases where gender expressed in various contexts is one of the main areas of interest. Due to the fact that this research is focusing on the influence of one's gender identity within the digital space, or more specifically on the manner in which the online presence is chattered and the content related to it is constructed and posted, gender is studied within the context of the digital space. Essential factors to identity development, such as gender, reflect and transcend the offline into the practices of the online space. As it was highlighted in the previous chapters, "traditional factors that have long influenced privacy management practises offline continue to shape privacy behaviors online" (Litt & Hargittai, 2014 :1), making gender inherently part of this group. This perspective is highlighted in the research article *Smile, snap, and share? A nuanced approach to privacy and online photo-sharing,* conducted by Eden Litt and Eszter Hargittai (2014) where they collected data from first year university students regarding their photo sharing practises and online behaviour. Their results divulge the fact that these traditional

factors are strongly infiltrated within the social actor and have a strong influence on him/her, guiding their actions in both the offline and the online realm. Despite this strong influence on one's behaviour, Eden Litt and Eszter Hargittai (2014) found that 'new factors outside of these traditional frameworks related to users' digital media experiences also influence people's online privacy management, like their digital experiences during childhood' (Litt & Hargittai, 2014 :1).

This statement adds a more nuanced understanding and perspective to the way the construction of privacy has been seen as binary, and that young people manage various aspects of their identity and how they perform and negotiate it in both online and offline social boundaries. In other words, the management of privacy in both contexts has become a dynamic and multidimensional process rather than being one based on the binary construct and maintaining a constant state of stability. The quantity and the type of personal information which is shared online differs based on the individual and their preferences, as they are generally engaged in 'strategies to help balance both the advantages and disadvantages of revealing and concealing personal information' (Litt & Hargittai, 2014 :2). These statements reflect the symbolic interactionist perspective or, more precisely, Goffman's theory on the self and on how social actors manage the information they share with others, in order to create a positive impression of themselves. This means that online activity and online content production is also curated and managed in order to create the idealised version of themselves, a version which strikes other's appreciation and esteem and therefore gains their acceptance within the online and offline communities. Based on Goffman's theory, the opposite effect can also occur in situations where individuals post on his/her feed types of content which can unleash the others' disapproval or anger and, as a consequence, they begin to be stigmatised and alienated from their previous community. A recent case that can be used as an example, is that of the 20 year old instagrammer Kaylen Ward who has become known online as the *Naked Philanthropist* after she sold nude photographs of herself in order to raise money for the fires in Australia. The result of this online activity was that, besides the fact that she raised over 500.000$ for the initial cause, she received backlash and criticism from both the online and offline communities. In one of her twitter posts Ward presented that she has received stigmatisation not only in the online context, but also from the people close to her, such as her parents who disowned her after the incident (Strapagiel, 2020).

This shows that not only has photo-sharing become a ubiquitous activity, but also pinpoints the fact that the general proliferation of the internet and the extensive influence of social media has made way for a lucrative relationship between the online and offline social engagement. Concerning this aspect, Hana Shepherd and Jeffrey Lane (2019) explored it in their research article titled *In the mix: Social integration and social media adoption,* where they analyse in great detail the nature of the relationship between the offline and online social engagement and overall activity. To uncover this, they applied a 'two-wave panel dataset with saturated network data from over 20,000 students in 56 New Jersey middle schools' where they tested how 'measures of integration into a community are associated with adoption and discontinuation of social media platforms over the course of a school year' (Shepherd & Lane, 2019: 1). Based on the data they collected, Shepherd and Lane (2019) uncovered that the level in which teens adopt or discontinue their use of certain social media platforms is directly linked to their level of bounding and competitive integration. In their article, the authors refer to bounding integration as the extent and the type of social connections and support the youth receives from the communities S/he performs in, while competitive integration is perceived as being the place one has in the social hierarchy of their group. The degree in which one archives both types of integration directly affects the extent, the amount of energy and time spent on the adoption of various social media platforms. By engaging and adopting a multitude of social media platforms the users have a chance to explore a vast space in which they can connect with other users and create or become members of communities, being able to access the necessary means through which one can 'be in the know and to be known, both of which are more valuable with greater social integration' (Shepherd & Lane, 2019: 1).

Both of these researches beg the question in regards to the impact these traditional factors have on one's behaviour, social perception of the world and therefore identity, and how they affect the way they produce content and the way they use social media sites. Digital ethnographies have been exploring this question, especially as social interaction has been outgrowing the more traditional forms of communication and idea of community. They have 'revealed how internet use is an "embedded, embodied, and everyday" phenomenon (Hine, 2015)' and that the 'data shows that participation in traditional activity settings mediates the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Hampton et al.,

2011)' (Shepherd & Lane, 2019: 1). In other words, ICTs and the various products and platforms that became a possibility through the internet, are prevalent in all aspects of modern life. Through social media platforms, users can access an array of information which can be used within the creation process of the user's reality and also self (DiMaggio and Cohen, 2005).

The tools embedded in these technologies, in order to coordinate the creative process in the construction of the virtual space, offer the chance towards self exploration and give the opportunity to try on multiple versions of one's vision of themselves. As previously presented, data has shown that children and teenagers are the ones to adopt digital technologies with ease and are also the ones who use it the most often. In their research, Hana Shepherd and Jeffrey Lane (2019) point out the fact that children and teenagers form various social contexts on social platforms where their fellow classmates have a strong online presence. Due to this, they argue that social media has become 'fundamental to learning about groups and cliques and issues related to popularity and status that are associated with drama (Marwick and boyd 2014)' (Shepherd & Lane, 2019: 2). To put it simply, what this research uncovered is the fact that, for adolescents, the value of being known, and of being in the known, should exponentially increase as their social integration becomes greater. Lane (2019) has also found compelling data which suggests that young people from unsafe or unreliable backgrounds and living environments, such as those found in places such as the streets of Harlem, extend their offline life into their online one. This process is a very important one as their online activity can provide security in a highly conflicted neighbourhood, by ingesting and sharing information in regards to potential acts of violence which may occur. Stevens et al. (2016) argued that youth from low income, urban upbringing act in a sense of interplay between their offline and online settings. For these youths this interplay and their online activity on social media platforms, such as Facebook, provide both a space where their everyday teen drama can play out, but also a place where they can create 'a local peer-level news centre. The value of being in the know should increase with greater social integration' (Shepherd & Lane, 2019: 2). These themes are also resurfaced in danah boyd's work as she recalls a teenager's college application to one of the Ivy League schools in the US where he talked about his desire to be able to break from his life in a community where gang culture thrived. His social media accounts were still holding gang imagery and promoting that type of

behaviour, elements of online activity and content production which left the recruiters confused and concerned. This also begs the reader to question which of the presented identities reflect the closest to his true self.

Teenagers use the digital space as an extension of the offline social scene, where they build the "best" version of themselves by managing their personal profiles on these social media platforms by editing and carefully selecting the content that will ultimately become public information. One type of content which is used in the process of online identity construction is the self image or the selfie. These types of pictures are usually modified by the users through the use of filters that are available on various photo editing applications, or even the social media application itself, in order to portray themselves to their online community in what teens consider to be a positive light. This type of behaviour is what Goffman encapsulates as being a process of maintenance of the surfaced agreement or veneer of consensus, in order to be 'facilitated by each participant concealing his own wants behind statements' or posts 'which assert values to which everyone present is likely to give lip-service' (Goffman, 1959:14). To elaborate on this quote in the current research context, Goffman's statements are transversal from the offline social space towards the online one. In the sense that through these selfies, or any kind of content which is produced and finally posted, after it is carefully edited, there also is a manner of asserting the values which are held by the community in which the user acts. Also, the user's online activity is not only reduced to the active production of content, but also to the more traditional version of passive media consumption of the content produced by the other individuals which is posted on their own profiles. Therefore, one can argue that on 'the internet, individuals can consume information, while also contributing new information on a broad variety of subjects' (Shane-Simpson et al., 2020:1). With the introduction as a medium, the internet with its symbolic systems and modalities, has managed to completely change the way modern communication and behaviour occurs. As the internet became a ubiquitous element of modern society, so has the activity of posting and sharing photos through the digital tools available.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

The digital era created another field or fields in which complex social research can be conducted in order to uncover the intricacies of digital social life, but with it came a new wave of ethical concerns

which need to be taken in consideration. These new technological developments brought forward considerable concerns about the methods of capturing data and the processing of storing it. This is especially relevant in the current context as algorithms that enable machine learning 'and artificial intelligence tools may pose particular risks for vulnerable [users] due to the lack of an ethical decision-making framework' (Thompson et al., 2020:1). Developing at an accelerating pace the digital arena leaves regulators far behind concerning many of its areas. This could be worrisome as the space provides an in depth and overwhelming amount of data which, as shown by the Cambridge Analytica case, can be sold or distributed at times to unknown entities (Cadwalladr & Graham, 2018). On account to this, since 2018, the European Union has implemented in its and EEA territory the general data protection regulation, also known as a GDPR, which has as a main goal the protection of citizens data and rights. This regulation has as main principles the minimization of data and infringes the right for them to be forgotten, aspects which might seem challenging for certain sociological data collection methods. In this sense, conducting digital ethnographies might be challenging as researchers tend to 'collect large repositories of data that sit in a liminal state of being that is both in the public domain, as well as contained within secure data storage systems within universities (Politou, Alepis, & Patsakis, 2018)' (Thompson et al., 2020:1).

There also needs to be pointed out that in social research a paramount aspect of all research concerning ethical aspects is the assurance of anonymity and protecting the respondents' identities. Social media is making data public and available which created new fields that are offering alluring new opportunities for researching relevant theoretical dynamics in regards to identity and gender portrayal. With profiles on social media, as certain personal information is made public, researchers have access to the documents posted, as analysing public posts does not necessarily count as a violation of privacy because these data are not presented in the same context as the way data collection would normally undergo (von Benzon, 2019; Wilkinson & Thelwall, 2011). The lack of the normal private context of social media profiles makes data accessible hitherto, and this does not reflect in an appropriate manner that privacy concerns are addressed as researchers still have an imperative responsibility to inform their subjects. Because of the Information revolution there has been continuous debates in social research regarding the ethical principles and their transgressions. Some of the most important ones that need to be

taken in consideration were broken down in four areas by Diener and Crandall (1978) which state that the researchers need to be mindful of '1. whether there is harm to participants; 2. whether there is a lack of informed consent; 3. whether there is an invasion of privacy; 4. whether deception is involved' (Bryman, 2012:135). In simple terms, the researcher is responsible for ensuring the privacy of the respondent, the appropriate processing of the collected data and the manner in which the said data is represented. When conducting digital research, it is necessary to reflect on these aspects, especially in the context of vulnerable participants. Research on young people has had a considerable growth in the past years which also brought in the foreground the fundamental fact that their experiences and views matter and need to be approached in an ethical fashion (Morrow, 2008).

Data collected from the digital area should establish the appropriate filters to help decide which of the data has meaning in the context of the research project and can be set in the categories that arise in the process of analysis and interpretation. A process of reflexivity on the collected digital data is necessary as it requires that the analytical lens be carefully chosen as it impacts the existing visual, audio and written data. Through this process data is presented as a result of this critical reflection that sets the way it is laid out. The mode of data presentation required to capture and illustrate '(sub)cultural identities and actions have significant ramifications for how such groups and individuals are understood and responded to by a variety of academic and lay audiences (Banks, 2014)' (Thompson et al., 2020:5). Choices in regard to the presentation of the data are paramount and need a sensitive view as they represent the way in which the self, the cultural context in which it develops and performs and the participants themselves are contributing to the way the study is framed. Within this research project, as part of the participants were underage, ethical considerations which were presented in this subsection were taken very seriously. The ethical principles followed are the ones presented here, but are also captured in the Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0 (2019), General Comment No. 25 of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child on children's rights in relation to the digital space (OHCHR, 2021) and 'Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR Human Rights Act, 1998), which protects the right to respect for private and family life and correspondence' (BSA 2017:4). A more detailed presentation of the ethical considerations taken in this research are presented in the following sections.

2.5. Sampling Strategies

In order to collect a sample, three strategies were applied. Those are convenience and snowball. In the initial stage of the research convenience sampling strategy was applied, while for the next two stages of the research snowball was used. The reason why snow ball sampling was employed is because as some respondents that answered the online questionnaire and were key participants in the first stage of the research, meaning that they helped distribute the questionnaire to their peers, they were contacted to participate and aid in reaching out to their peers for the focus group stage. The characteristics for the selection did not change, but for the next stages it was a priority to have a more equal gender presence and age distribution.

Taking all of these factors into account and in order to find a valid and reliable answer to this research's main questions, multiple data collection techniques are applied to the sample. As it was presented and justified throughout this paper, the main populace of interest for this study is the segment which is the most enthralled and captivated into the online space and the digital technologies that come with it. Meaning that, according to current research, the population segment most likely to use and fully implement the software and the online spaces as a whole, by using digital technologies, are children and teenagers. Due to the fact that the main research question is concerned with the development and the impact of identity, the way one's identity shapes the content on the profiles and the manner in which they present their online self, it is appropriate to postulate that teenagers are the pertinent choice, for they are highly concerned with these aspects. In other words, the main population of interest for this study is represented by teenagers between the ages 15-19, who are enrolled in urban based high schools. For the sample of this research the teens were from various institutions which are located in the main cities of the counties from the North-East region of Romania. In some cases, where the parents of the children from these schools were known, they were contacted directly in regards to their teenager participating in the research project. There is no explicit motivation or ulterior motive for choosing these schools, their sampling being entirely based on convenience and randomness. Meaning that the sampling techniques applied in the initial stage of the research, for both the selection of the teenagers and that of their high schools. These institutions were contacted through various colleagues either

from work or from university who have connections or are directly involved with them.

The sampling techniques applied in this study are a mixture of probability and non- probability sampling approaches, as they provide an accessible manner to reach the desired population and form a valid sample, but also help to ensure that the important factors are taken into consideration and therefore providing a low sampling error. The first sampling technique which is applied is a nonprobability one known as a convenience sample, which Alan Bryman defines as being the type of sample 'that is simply available to the researcher by virtue of its accessibility' (Bryman, 2012: 201). In the case of this study, taking into consideration the fact that the main population of interest is underage and therefore considered a vulnerable group, it is difficult to get into contact with a large number without the support of institutions which are directly involved with them. Access to these institutions is also difficult to attain, as their main concerns are the insurance of the child's protection and education, and the bureaucratic steps can be quite tedious. Therefore, in order to obtain entry in these high schools, the most convenient approach was to contact acquaintances or colleagues who have some kind of a relation to them, meaning that the person of contact is either a professor or has an administrative position within the school. This eased the process as it offered a stable bridge between the researcher and the administration of the school. In other words, the high schools which were chosen in this study do not fulfil any special characteristic that is valuable or viable for the research and there is no special reasoning for approaching them other than simple convenience. With that said, this does not mean that the contextual setting of the schools and their perceived and symbolic values reflected on them by the community does not influence the data collected. These high schools are located in urban areas in medium to large main cities from the north- east area of the country and are considered by the community as being good schools that are competitive in their student selection.

Concerning this sampling strategy, Bryman points out that the collected 'findings may prove quite interesting, but the problem with such a sampling strategy is that it is impossible to generalize the findings, because we do not know what population this sample is representative' (Bryman, 2012:201). By this he means that the teenagers which participated in the first stage of the research are not representative of all teenagers in general, due to the fact that their social circumstances are different from other teens from the

community, as most pupils that go to these schools are from a well off family background and from a higher social class than the ones from other schools. As it is perceived by the research community, the data collected through this strategy does not allow the possibility of affirming any definitive answers due to the fact that the sample cannot be used to generalise. Still, it does offer the necessary bed of information that paves the way for further research on the subject and aids in preparing the future research tools which will be applied. The issue of appropriateness and validation of research findings based on the sampling strategies that are applied is also discussed in Justin Jager, Diane L. Putnick, and Marc H. Bornstein 's 2017 article entitled *More than Just Convenient: The Scientific Merits of Homogeneous Convenience Samples.* Within this paper it is presented that convenience sampling can present certain key advantages and can be a valuable technique especially in developmental science. The authors also state that it is a useful and popular tool to use when the sample consists of a younger age group, such as teenagers and students, as it makes it easier to get in touch with them and they are more willing to volunteer to participate in the study. Convenience sampling is seen as being advantageous in the sense that it is 'cheap, efficient, and simple to implement', but it also presents several disadvantages as it 'lacks clear generalizability'. One can argue that the advantages and disadvantages of probability and nonprobability strategies are varying and in reverse. Meaning that '[w]hereas probability samples yield results with clearer generalizability, convenience samples are far less expensive, more efficient, and simpler to execute' (Jager et al., 2017:20).

The authors in this article state that although probability sampling strategies hold a more viable scientific merit as they offer a clear generalizability, non-probability sampling strategies, such as convenience sampling, are seen as the norm in the developing scientific areas. Between the years 2007 and 2011, Bornstein et al. (2013) followed the use and applicability of various sampling techniques within five developmental science journals and he found that '92.5% utilized a convenience sample', while probability techniques are 'accounted for only 5.5% of studies' (Jager et al., 2017:27). Therefore, one can postulate that due to the increasing number of studies, which apply these types of strategies, the aforementioned sampling technique within developmental research was over 16 times more likely in being chosen to be used in a research than probability ones. Still, nonprobability sampling strategies, such as convenience sampling, are used in this research

only in the initial stages of a study as it provides a more flexible manner to reach the intended population and form a first sample. Therefore, a convenience sampling strategy is applied in order to reach a wider sample of teenagers through the high school, which are willing and available to participate in this study. This type of sampling strategy is highly fitting, as it offers a smooth entry to the targeted population, ensuring an appropriately sized sample and environment in which they can be easily approached. Once the first stage of the research is complete and there is a general available sample, it gives the opportunity to apply a probability sample strategy in order to provide a proportional and accurate distribution of the population necessary for the next research stages.

This study aims to capture and explore the respondent's own understanding of their gender identity and the impact it has on the way they carry themselves within the cyber sphere. To capture a proportional representation in regards to the biographical background of our respondent, a convenience sample strategy can be lacking in comprehensiveness and reliability of the collected data. Convenience sampling is useful in the initial stage of the research, as it offers an easy access to the targeted population and, in this case, a middle person who eases the subjects towards the researcher and the subject matter. Various acquaintances who work with, or are themselves parents of teenagers, and who gave consent to be contacted were informed about the research and asked directly if they give permission for their teenager to participate in the study. In some cases, the parents encouraged and allowed their teenagers to share the questionnaire link to other classmates or friends. Teenagers who were over the age of 18 also collaborated and distributed the link to their peers through various Facebook groups aimed at high schoolers.

After the first research stage, in order to gather a smaller sample for the qualitative research stage a snowball sampling strategy was also applied in order to reach the targeted population. This stage, as mentioned, is aimed at understanding the overall aspects of online activity and to try and identify a possible connection between gender identity presented while engaging and producing content. As the upcoming research tools which are applied are qualitative, and therefore the sample is smaller, the participants were carefully selected by engaging with key youth that aided this process within the first stage. The number of respondents was reduced to thirty-one for the focus group stage of the research and to twenty- seven for the photographic analysis stage. Snowball sampling was used to collect the sample that participated in the

next two stages of the research project. One main requirement for the teens that were selected was that they had to be part of the initial sample and that they had completed the online questionnaire. The rest of the socio-demographic requirements remained the same as the ones from the previous research stage.

2.6. First Stage: Online Questionnaire

Regarding this stage of the research, once contact with the school was made and the process was approved, the parents and the teenagers were contacted and informed of the research. They were informed about the goals and objectives of this study and all questions concerning it were answered. They were told about the multiple stages of the research, the tools which will be used and about the themes of discussion. Due to the age of the participants, the parents and teenagers were assured that they will receive full anonymity and that they can back out of the research if they choose to do so. An informed consent was issued to the legal guardians of underage teenagers and one to the participants who are over 18 years of age. The teenagers who chose to participate and received permission to do so, were informed that if there is a question which makes them uncomfortable, they do not need to answer it, and if at any point they wish to stop participating, they can do so. To accommodate this claim, none of the questions from the questionnaire were tagged as an obligatory question, which would not allow the respondent to submit their answers without it. Concerning this subject, the option to choose other or neither was added, in order to give the respondents the possibility to answer all of the questions without feeling forced to pick between certain variables.

As it was mentioned before, the first stage of this research is quantitative and it consists of an online questionnaire that was distributed once the steps above were completed. Concerning the questionnaire, the reason why it was chosen to be online and not 'self- administered questionnaires, in which respondents are asked to complete the questionnaire themselves; surveys administered by interviewers in face-to-face encounters; and surveys conducted by telephone', is firstly due to the fact that the sample is, as explained in the theoretical framework section, a highly tech savvy group (Babbie, 2007:286). Secondly, because it is convenient as software which accommodates the creation of online forms can neatly gather the collected data in Excel sheets, and thirdly it is because of the current world state which makes it difficult to engage in face-to-face

data collection practises. The software used to operate the research is Google Forms. Once the questionnaire was finalised and the respondents were contacted and consented to the study, through the aid of the personnel or through direct contact of their parents, teenagers received the link of the questionnaire through various messaging applications, such as Whatsapp, Facebook Messenger, email. Once available, the teenager completed it from the comfort of their own home and device, without additional supervision from the researcher, parents or professors (Lin et al., 2020; Chen, 2019). This questionnaire was designed with the guide of two studies which explored the themes of gender identity and social media online activity. The first study used as a guide in the questionnaire design process is that used by Tan et al. in her 2010 research on *Online activities and writing practises of urban Malaysian adolescents,* where she and her team have studied the differences in online practises and consumption between male and female teenagers in Malaysian high schools. The main objective of the study was to uncover the effects social media activity has on literacy and language learning, but they also focused on seeing whether there are any gender differences in the way these platforms are used and in the type of content teenagers consume and produce.

Her work looks at teen online practises from a sociocultural perspective and constitutes them as viable social practises, an attitude encouraged by symbolic interactionist perspective as well, as through it we can observe events and episodes of identity performance. Adopting a mixed research methodology, they are looking at youth online activity at both a micro and macro level. Their macro level study constituted a survey which sought to understand and uncover 'trends in online practices, for example, which websites they frequent, how often and for how long, popular activities and awareness of issues related to online use' (Tan et al, 2010:549). These elements also represent the trends followed by this research in order to better understand the habits and behaviour performed by Romanian teenagers. The second study which guided the development of the main instrument of data collection in this stage of the research, is one also by Tan et al. (2010) in her research called Livingstone's *EU Kids Online Project*. This project's main focus is on children between the ages of 9 and 16 years, experiences, risks and opportunities they encounter in the digital space. The participating respondents were selected from 33 states, one of which is Romania (Livingstone, 2020).

Therefore, the main goal of this questionnaire was to answer several essential questions which helped guide the direction that

the next stages of the research should take and to better understand the targeted population. As a consequence, this questionnaire is looking to answer the following questions: what are the motivators for teenagers to engage in online activity? How do they feel about new media regarding representation? What social media platforms do they use and how much time do they spend on them? What gender differences can be observed in regards to new media consumption? What difference can be observed in online activity behaviours between males and females? This quantitative study looked to assess and identify differences between male and female in regards to new media familiarity, use, consumption and gender identity management. In order to check the direction, validity and reliability of this instrument, it was piloted with 50 students. Due to this outlook and through the guide of the two studies mentioned above, the questionnaire contains four parts. The first one is related to socio-demographic information about the respondents, such as their age, the school year they are in and, of course, their gender. The second part is about the digital devices they use, the frequency and duration of their activities on social media platforms, the time they spend online and the types of platforms they engage with. The third part is about their online activities, motivations that led them to engage on social media and the measures they took to minimise risk. The fourth part focuses on representation on social media, gender identity and peer conformity.

This research views this stage of data collection simply as an initial step that contributes to forming an overall image of what the youth think about and how they use the digital space. In this sense, this data is simply analysed solely through a descriptive perspective and no hypothesis testing or inferential analysis is considered essential. With this in mind and taking into account the theoretical framework, several hypotheses could be tested within future research projects. The first hypothesis that could be tested is that the youth, regardless of their gender, engage in intense, frequent and for long periods of time on various digital devices and social media platforms (Tan et al, 2010; Livingstone, 2020). The second hypothesis is that gender differences become noticeable in the digital content they consume and post, the type of new media they feel represented by, the motivations for using social media and the frequency in exposing one's front stage version of their gender identity (Goffman, 1959; Buttler, 1991). The third is that, when it comes to their performance of gender, both male and female youth try to conform to the pro-social behavioural (Wright, 2018) standards of their peer group in order to minimise the risks of

rejection. Within this stage of the research there are four elements which are conceptualised and subsequently operationalised. The first concept which is looked at and operationalized is online activity, because in this stage of the research this concept is related to the information that is necessary to be collected in order to provide a clearer view of the current trends and attitudes that teenagers have towards social media platforms, and the frequency with which they are used. Research projects have pointed out the fact that adolescents are 'heavy users of smartphones and smartphone-embedded technologies, including social media' where they engage in social practises with friends and family and where they produce and share 'photos, videos and update about their lives' (Hawk et al., 2019:65). Therefore, the concept of online activity is seen in this research as being present frequently and for copious amounts of time on various social media platforms and where the users carefully post information about themselves by using various media formats – such as text, photographs and video – or just passively consuming other types of information (Burnell et al., 2020; Hawk et al, 2019; Barry et al., 2017; Tan et al., 2010; Ko et al, 2009; Bartal et al, 2019). This concept was therefore operationalised in order to measure and assess how often and for how long teenagers engaged on social media platforms, what devices they use and what platforms they use. There were 8 questions used to measure this dimension of online activity where the first two are concerned with the type of digital devices teenagers use for their internet consumption. The other dimension of online activity measure is to identify the various forms of social behaviour and attitude regarding posting content on their social media account. In this case, operationalisation was fulfilled by three questions and a multi-indicator Likert Scale ranging in ten points from completely disagree to completely agree.

The second concept which is being looked at in this research is that of gender identity, which due to its complexity and nuanced state is quite difficult to appropriately measure in a quantitative study. In order to capture the essence of one's gender identity by using a quantitative instrument, gender identity is defined in this sense as 'a multidimensional construct; one aspect of gender identity—gender typicality (Egan & Perry, 2001)—is frequently cited as a strong predictor of personal and social adjustment' (Endendijk et al., 2019: 332). Meaning that, in this study, gender identity (Miller, 2018, Johnson, 2018) is assessed through the level of compatibility that the individual has with the one associated with their biological sex and with another. In other words, by adopting a dual-dimensional

conceptualization, one can capture the sum of the 'complexity of gender identity and the experiences of individuals who feel similar to both genders or to neither gender (Butkowski, Panarello, & Santo, 2017; Martin, Cook, & Andrews, 2016; Martin et al., 2017; Pauletti, Menon, Cooper, Adults, & Perry, 2017)' (Endendijk et al., 2019: 332). Therefore, by adopting Endendijk's (2019) methods of gender identity measure, this study uses 6 items which were rated by using a ten-point Likert scale ranging from 'I do not agree' to 'I agree', to identify teenagers' attitudes towards where they position their gender identity. This is done by applying the gender-identity mesures, coined by Endendijk and her team (2019), which are: '(a) feeling similar to one's own gender, but not to the other gender; (b) feeling similar to both one's own and the other gender; (c) feeling dissimilar to one's own gender; and (d) feeling similar to neither gender' (Endendijk et al., 2019: 332). This point also accentuates Goffman's perspective regarding the impact of the socialisation process, and therefore that of the social groups in which social actors interact, in adopting a prosocial front stage behaviour.

This perspective on the concept of gender identity calls forward a need to also take a look at and include the concept of representation within new media, as it shows with which types of gender behaviour teenagers identify. The definition of perspective this research adopts in looking at the concept of representation is the one coined by Branston and Stafford (2010) who argues that the images used by media to reflect certain aspects of reality are not a true presentation of what is, but rather someone else's perspective of it. By over presenting certain messages, through the use of images, video and text, it makes the essence it is trying to transmit seem organic rather than constructed. In connection to gender, the representative messages which are received are also adding to the socialisation process as teenagers oscillate in following influencers who share similar gender traits to their own concept of gender identity. Due to this, the concept of representation is often linked to that of gender in research studies (da Silva, 2017; Aran-Ramspott, Fedele, Tarragó, 2018, Leban, Seo, Voyer, 2019) which look at how social media influencers function as representative factors and become an integral part of teenager's digital culture. This study looks at the type of content teenagers consume typically online and whether they follow social media influencers or not. For assessing the measurements, the Tan et al. (2010) method was used as a guide for the 3 items dedicated to it.

As this instrument is only intended to provide a macro view of the attitudes and trends which can be identified in teenagers, in

regards to their social media consumption and their views on gender, the analysis of the collected data is not intended to provide an overly complex overview of it. The collected quantitative data was analysed using SPSS 26 in order to give a descriptive and a small inferential analysis, which shows the results in the form of percentages and histogram, with the aim to pinpoint the gender difference and preferences recorded in regards to teenagers' use of social media. The results of the analysis are highly important as they help decide the direction of the research in the sense that it helps in deciding which social media platform will be focused on in the following research stages. Also, it is worth noting that the questions of the focus group interviews and the choice of conducting a photographic analysis are also influenced by these results.

2.7. Second Stage: The Focus Groups

Once the first stage of the data collection is completed and the data has been processed and analysed, two components have occurred as a result based on the findings. The first one is that the second sampling strategy was applied. Meaning that respondents were selected through the process of stratification, contacted and asked if they would like to participate in the next stages of this research, which represent the micro level of investigation. The main focus in this stage was to have as much as possible an even sample of genders and age groups. This means to have an even gender turnout and significant age diversity in each studied group of people. The invitation to the focus groups was sent out to 42 teenagers, as the initial plan was to have 7 focus groups made out of 6 teenagers. Out of the total initial sample, 31 participants answered to the invitation and agreed to participate in the focus groups. Before the focus group, an informed consent form was sent out to the teens and they were asked to either sign themselves if they were over the age of 18, or to give them to their parents. In some cases, the parents were reached out to, beforehand the invitation was sent out for the teen to participate, in order to get their approval for the interaction and to explain the details of the research. The main way of communicating with the respondents was through DMs on Facebook messenger and on the phone. The first stage of this research took place during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic which made physical contact with the respondents almost impossible. Out of the 7 focus groups only one took place face-to-face during a short period when the quarantine restrictions were lifted. The meeting took place outside, in the front yard of an

acquaintance where chairs were placed at the advised distance by health officials. The rest of the meetings took place online through the use of Google Meet. The sessions lasted on average between one and two hours, the longest being 1 hour and 46 minutes and the shortest being 52 minutes. All the sessions were recorded with the participants' approval. Only the respondents who gave their consent when they filled out the questionnaire were selected to participate in the next micro level stages of research and were invited to the focus group interviews. This stage of inquiry looks at understanding the differences between gender identity performance in the front stage and the backstage (Goffman, 1959), whereas the online space is also understood as a front stage environment where certain social filters are implemented in order to perform a socially accepted performance of one's self (Johnson, 2018). This perspective is highly attractive in the academic community as it offers a unique opportunity to uncover different facets of human behaviour in the various realms it traverses to in the contemporary context. One example of this type of study is the one done by Shepherd H. and Lane J. (2019) whose interest was to understand 'the nature of the relationship between online and offline social life' (Shepherd & Lane, 2019:1), especially as new media has infiltrated the ecosystem (Jenkings, 2006) creating new forms of socialisation which give way to a generation of digital nomads (Aran-Ramspott et al. 2018).

The second component, which the first research stage has provided, represents a refinement of the initial research question, and therefore that of the used interview guide. It aims to graph an in-depth understanding of what kind of social filters do the teenagers use before posting content online? What are the differences between online and offline gender identity performance? What is the role of peer practices and culture on online and offline gender identity? What are the motivations for teenagers to engage in online activities on social platforms? The instrument used in collecting data is aimed at furthering our understanding of the respondents' view on their concept of gender and its influence on their online activity. The reason for choosing this type of data collection instrument is due to its flexibility to expand on certain points of interest, and allowing the respondent to interact with each other and feel free to discuss their experiences in a group setting, while also providing a stable point to go back to and continue the inquiry process. In their research Adler et al. (2019) defines the focus group interview as being a data collection technique which can be 'described as "a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive,

non- threatening environment" (Krueger & Casey, 2009, p. 2).' (Adler et al., 2019:1). This type of interviews allows a more focused and in-depth observation and exploration of a tightly defined subject of discussion which, in mixed research, functions as an appropriate supplement to surveys which explore the subject matter at a larger scale. Bryman (2008) also speaks greatly of this instrument as it provides the social researcher with the opportunity to not religiously follow an interview guide, but rather to interfere in the discussion when it is deemed necessary. This technique is highly used by researchers who apply mixed methods to conduct, collect and analyse data for their studies.

Once the 7 groups were established, they were given any additional information they requested and were told that the duration of the interview is around one hour. Of course, in some of the cases, there was additional time needed for the discussions to reach their conclusions. Before the focus group session began, an ice break game took place to help the youth get used to each other and for the moderator and the participants to become acquainted.

Everybody was asked to present themselves and to add an aspect they find interesting about themselves which has to begin with the first letter of their first name. They received a table which, in the case of the group where the face-to-face meeting was possible, they completed themselves with their name, age, gender, Instagram ID and telephone or email to be contacted if it is necessary, while for the online groups these data were recorded by the researcher. This information was later centralised in an Excel table in order to have an overview on the participants for each group. The invitations were sent out in such a way that it aimed to capture a diverse representation of age and gender. This was done so in order to capture a complex view of the way the respondents present themselves and their thoughts. Although the initial plan was to have three girls and three boys in every group, because not all the participants showed up for the sessions, some of them only had boys, others only girls, while the rest were mixed. In the end this was a beneficial occurrence as it brought forward certain insights regarding interaction between genders. All the focus group interviews took place in Romanian, but the coding process was done in English, also the relevant sections were translated accordingly.

To ensure that the interaction between the teens is continuous and holistic, to act as a visual aid, two YouTube clips made by content creators known as *Vintage Space* (female influencer) and *Today I Found Out* (male host) were shown. The reason for choosing these clips, made by these influencers, is because they have the

same subject of discussion, they both present the same scientific subject, in this case being theories about the moon landing, the only obvious difference being the gender of the presenter. This technique was used and applied in their research by Hogg M. & Garrow J. (2003) to identify any differences in content consumption, interpretation and analysis of various advertisements done by different genders. In their research they showed three clips of car commercials in which different genders drove the advertised product. In one there was only one man, in another there was only one woman and the third clip had both genders inside the car. The discussion of their focus groups revolved around these clips. In this research the clips only functioned as an ignition for the whole setting and conversation. After watching a small portion of the clips mentioned, the participants were asked to write down, for each topic, the first three descriptive words that come into their mind about the word girl/boy, about the clips they just watched made by the woman/man and about the type of content boys/girls post in general. Using these exercises as a foundation, the rest of the focus group interview was split into three areas of discussion such as internet and social media use, the process of content production, the impact of the digital on the physical and their relationship with the online realm during the pandemic.

Once the data collection process was finalised in this stage and the interviews were transcribed, the data was processed and analysed using a thematic analysis method. This type of analysis is often described and seen as a 'matrix based method for ordering and synthesising data' (Ritchie et al. 2003: 219). Meaning that it offers the researchers the possibility to fully explore the qualitative data they have collected, and helps them build a central index of themes and subthemes which can be represented in the form of a matrix that closely resembles the ones given by quantitative methods of data analysis (Bryman, 2012). A key aspect of this analysis method is the manner in which the codes are created, or better said, in this case, how the thematic framework is constructed (Gibbs, 2007). The extraction technique is encouraged by both Gibbs (2007) and Bryman (2008, 2012) who state that the themes and subthemes are extracted from the transcripts of the interview and they essentially represent the recurring ideas, metaphors, analogies, local expressions or slang, which might hold some relevant meaning to the subject matter, which after their detection are applied to the data. In other words, the identified themes and subthemes are the construct of a thorough reading of the interview transcripts which constitute the existing qualitative data. This

process of reading and re-reading the data allows for an in-depth analysis and understanding of the existing themes and subthemes which are identifiable. The identified core themes become the main framework of the analysis and the sub themes are used to present the existing data for each case in the existing matrix. The techniques and guide for the establishing of codes, and the interpretation of sub themes and themes were done with the guidance of Braun and Clarke's (2013) method. The software used to code and identify these main themes and sub themes is NVivo 12 Pro. A more detailed presentation of this process is given in the *Data Analysis: Focus Group* chapter.

A theoretical resource which inspired the choosing of this type of analysis is Livingstone's application and the understanding of it, as presented in her 2011 research study *Taking risky opportunities in youthful content creation*. In this qualitative study, Livingstone (2011) used open-ended interviews in order to uncover opportunities and risks concerning online identity and peer relations in the process of content creation on social media sites. She focused and uncovered themes related to the motivations and choices which guided the individual in constructing their social media profiles, 'the semiotic and social 'reading' of others profile' – in the sense of what was mentioned about the form of the profile, the represented identity and the effect of the peers on these practices – and the 'social and personal meanings' in regards to the relations sustained on the platforms (Livingstone, 2011:389). In order for her to process the data, Livingstone transcribed her audio recorded interviews before coding them using NVivo. This type of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software is also suggested as being a relevant tool to the qualitative analysis process by Bryman (2012) and Gibbs (2007). Therefore, in order to facilitate and ease the coding and analysis process, this study is also using NVivo to process its qualitative data. Besides these aspects, Livingstone's study is also helpful in the sense that she also uses online content analysis as an instrument for data collection and interpretation of the teenagers' profiles and content creation process.

2.8. Third Stage: Photographic analysis

It is believed that, in terms of representation, traditional forms of media are highly genderfied in a heteronormative manner (da Silva, 2017; Johson, 2018; Branston and Stafford, 2010), but, in terms of new media, studies show that rather than lessening or

providing more freedom in gender expression, those heteronormative views of gender have transferred over to it (Kucirkova et al., 2017). Photographic and online content analysis is a technique generally used to observe and study the content of media products and to develop a systematic map regarding the intentions, be it through direct or indirect approach, which shaped the information that was sent through media messages. The main goal of this type of analysis is to point out how the information and ideologies transmitted through the media formats can affect the audience's perception in regards to the subject matter.

This method of analysis allows the researcher to 'identify clear and coherent categories that highlight salient aspects of the message conveyed and to use objective and reliable methods of calculating their relative significance in the overall message' (Scott, 2006: 40). This stage of the research began simultaneously with the prior one, meaning as soon as the respondents gave, respectively, received permission from their guardians to participate in this research project. Depending on the results from the online questionnaire concerning their most frequently used social media platform, and once it is confirmed that all participants indeed use it often, then their profiles are investigated. Their activity and posts are followed throughout the whole research process which looks at the symbolic meanings associated with one's gender, in the sense of what sides of their identity do they share and focus on when posting content on their social media sites? How much their online gender identity fits with the cultural norms approved by their peer group? What elements do they use to enact gender identity online? What differences can be observed between the male and female identity presentation on their profile? The categories which are used are based on the content which is posted on the 31 social media profiles which are being researched. This part of the research is also focused on the frequency in which the respondents use certain words, images and video to convey certain meanings.

A few research projects that applied similar data collection techniques and stood out are those of Livingstone (2011) and Davis and Weinstein's (2017) with their method of analysing carefully curated identities on social media profiles and the impact it can have on one's performance of self. An accurate example of this is the case Trevor from Davis & Weinstein's (2017) research on displays of identity in the online space. Trevor is presented to have an Instagram account which is filled with imagery that aims to depict that he is a strong aggressive young man, as he is from an environment where gang violence and behaviour is prolific. The

respondent is described in the research as being a shy 17 year old who seeks acceptance from his peer group, who is highly involved in gang activity. This leads to the argument that his Instagram account, although filled with certain imagery in order to appease to those he seeks approval and validation from, does not represent a true reflection of his identity, as 'the identities that young people display online are sometimes quite different from those that they express offline' (Davis & Weinstein, 2017: 9). Taking this distinction and the process of impression management in consideration, after a preliminary analysis of their online content, the respondents are asked about the aims of certain pieces of content and the overall message their page is trying to transmit to its audience. When they were asked what type of content they post most often, the teens replied that they mostly post photos. In this stage of the research, the focus is set on one's representation of gender identity through photography. This is done in order to see if there are any strong differences in performance of gender identity, depending on the time and place where it is enacted, and if there is a strong difference between what is present in the front stage, therefore in the digital space, and the identity they act out in the backstage. This point of the research is also trying to capture the instruments that are used in the process of impression management. Photography is a visual tool which is used in 'qualitative social research to both produce and represent knowledge' (Pink, 2006:320). Looking and analysing the visual content they produce might be especially useful as social actors use them in various forms of interaction in order to efficiently communicate 'knowledge, experiences and ideas in ways that we cannot, using only written or spoken words, the visual is gaining increasing importance as a social research method' (Pink, 2006:320). As a guide for this stage of the research, the study conducted by Döring et al. (2016) will be used. In their study they take a very close look at the types of meanings young people send out through their visual content, focusing especially on the photos they post. The selfie, which according to Döring et al. (2016) is a photograph generated by the user and it is utilised as a tool for self representation that is especially preferred by adolescents. The analysis of the selfie is seen as an opportunity of identifying experimentation of gender identity and to establish the adoption or refusal of stereotypical gender behaviour. To analyse the social media content posted by the youth, Döring takes on as a theoretical framework Goffman's categories, together with those added by Kang (1997) regarding body display within photographs. These theoretical aspects are taken from Goffman's *Gender Advertisements* (1979)

where he denotes that women are presented in advertisements by 'wearing revealing, hardly any, or no clothes at all, which is often associated with sexualized images of women' (Döring et al., 2016:956). Goffman's categories are explored and applied in many research projects that examine the way gender is presented in commercials and adverts, but also in other forms of media such as music videos, film and so on. As it was presented in the *Literature Review* chapter of this paper, the way gender is depicted in media not only reflects certain perspectives of gender behaviours and roles but also acts as a guide in the process of socialisation that can lead to distorted and stereotypical views. Their photographic sample was analysed by using qualitative methods, more precise content analysis, and they measured ten variables, the first one being related to biological sex of the content producer (male or female), the next 'six categories for gender- stereotyping based on Goffman (1979) and Kang (1997): feminine touch, ritualization of subordination (measured with two indicators: posture and imbalance), licensed withdrawal (measured with two indicators: withdrawing gaze and loss of control), and body display. To these, other three categories are added that look specifically at gendered behaviour, such as 'kissing pout, muscle presentation, and faceless portrayal' (Döring et al., 2016:959).

This research adopts this theoretical aspect within this stage of the research as it might help in the process of understanding the way gender identity impacts one's digital content production and also the way they choose to present their concept of self. Unlike Dörings et al. research, through this study, in order to analyse the respondent's photos from their Instagram account, the same thematic analysis method as presented in the previous research stage is applied and the categories built are extracted from the imaginary holding on to the overall theoretical framework of this research. Meaning that we look at the collected data from the dramaturgical perspective of performing identity in the different stages of life. This process might also contribute to looking into any potential theme differences between the second and the final stage of this research. Another key research which looks at the way youth are performing identity in social media platforms is the one conducted by Kaufmann (2011) titled *Heteronarrative analysis: examining online photographic narratives,* who uses photographic narratives to critically analyse the stories her respondents had to talk about their gender and sexuality. Kaufmann saw that 'the number of students creating their identity online is growing exponentially, and gender and sexuality are two of the most

violently contested identity categories for adolescents, finding ways to understand how gender and sexual identities are shaped by students on these sites is imperative' (Kaufmann, 2011: 7). In other words, Kauffman identified early on the importance of analysing the digital content posted on social media platforms as a space of identity performance and she looks at the way the narrative constructed by the informants function as a re/production of heteronormative gender and sexual identities. As a method of analysis she uses a Foucault heteronormative theoretical framework and observes 'four primary layers through which an image and its meaning are constituted: the photograph itself is interpreted through the technology of the camera, the film, the shutter speed, the point of view of the shot (Harper 2000), and the context of the photograph (Pink 2001)' (Kauffman, 2011:8).

Similar approach was also adopted by Sander (2009) who asked his respondents to create meaningful photographic essays about their gender and sexuality which were discussed afterwards in an interview. During the interview each photo received a narrative from the informant, a story associated with the visual which reflected certain performances and management of impression through the aid of the digital tool. There are several studies (Charteris et al., 2019; Jones, 2011; Deutsch & Theodorou, 2010; Arthurs et al., 2017; Aran- Ramspott, 2018) which applied the method of photographic analysis in order to understand the identity performance and reassurance which occurs on social media sites and through visual materials. This represents the final stage of data collection in this research project as the next steps are focused on data processing, analysis and interpretation. Goffman's perspective on the self and the way one uses various symbols and cues to perform during social interaction, as well as his dual stage behaviour is an appropriate theoretical framework and perspective for this study as it allows an in-depth exploration of identity in various environments. The mixed methodology approach also aids in the process of acquiring an in-depth understanding of the subject matter, as due to its complex and multilayered aspects, gender identity performance and influence is highly difficult to capture by using one method or one instrument alone. To conclude, the work presented above represents the overall methodological plan for uncovering the influence of gender identity on digital content production. The following chapters dive into presenting and interpreting the analysed data, collected through the presented methodology.

Chapter 3

Results and Discussions

3.1. Online Questionnaire

The following chapter takes a deep dive into the first stage of the data collection process that took place within this research. As mentioned within *Chapter 3 – Methodological Considerations* the first method that was applied is quantitative. The data collection tool that was used is an online questionnaire, constructed with Google Forms. The reason for choosing this platform is because it provided accessibility to the customization of the questionnaire, provided a preview analysis of the data, collected all the data in an csv data file and provided easy share functions. The following chapter presents a descriptive analysis of the collected quantitative data and sets the data within the currently applied theoretical framework. The quantitative stage of this research, as was mentioned above, functions only as an exploratory and descriptive study of the teenager's use and relationship with social media platforms and implicitly with digital devices. In this book, descriptive statistics are seen as a 'set of methods and activities that permit the description of a given body of data, without making inferences about another set of possible observations (from a larger group, e.g., a population)' (Raykov & Marcoulides, 2013:7). This is also a perspective adopted in this analysis segment, as it focuses on presenting the existing data as is, and does not intend in providing or attempting any sort of inferences. Descriptive statistics offers the opportunity of forming a clear view on the studied sample and of setting the whole area of interest in such a manner in which it can be clearly observed. It enables the researcher to be able to grasp a stupendous amount of data and present it in an ingestible manner, permitting their readers to extract the relevant information through the use of visual aids, such as graphs.

Similar to the manner in which Tan et al., (2010) presented in their research, as they also used descriptive statistics to present and summarise the sample data they have collected, the following analysis aims to capture and illustrate the findings in order to fully understand the key areas of interest. Their research not only

functioned as a guide for the questionnaire design and the operationalization of the concepts, but also in regards to the type and the steps taken for the analysis. Therefore, with this in mind, it is necessary to make it clear that the main goal is to understand the overall picture in regards to teenagers' online activities on social media platforms and to uncover what type of gendered differences in regards to use and consumption exist. Because of this, in this section, it is explored if the current data can provide some answers to the previously mentioned questions: What gender differences can be observed in regards to new media consumption? What social media platforms do they use and how much time do they spend on them? What gender differences can be observed in online activity behaviours between males and females? This stage is seen as necessary because it provides the researcher the opportunity to better understand the happenings, concerning the studied subject, in the actual field and it is seen as an important first step in helping form the guide for the next stage of the research. Meaning that the findings from this stage are used to better understand the subject of inquiry and to be able to form pertinent questions which help in furthering the research process for the next two stages.

The online questionnaire was distributed to the sample using strategies mentioned in the previous chapter, meaning that it was distributed to teenagers through digital channels from May of 2020 until December of 2021. Although the questionnaire was still being distributed, a part of the sample for the next research stage was decided in August 2020, while the rest were picked out in March of 2021. A more detailed explanation of this process is offered in the next chapter. In regards to this current stage in the research, the data underwent different analyses throughout the whole process of the data collection. This can be viewed in articles such as Seserman & Cojocaru's (2020) paper named *An Exploration Of Gender Differences In Teenagers' Use, Consumption And Digital Production* in which the data collected from a sample of n=324 underwent a preliminary analysis. The final sample which is analysed in this book is made out of n=495 high school students between the ages of 15-19. Before the online questionnaire was distributed to the whole sample it was pilot tested with 50 high school students (15 male and 35 female) collected through the same sampling strategies as the other participants from the urban areas of the North-East region of Romania. It is worth mentioning that a big part of the sample is mainly from the county of Suceava, the rest of the sample being from the counties of Vaslui and Botoşani. Because of the convenience strategy sampling it is necessary to mention that the

sample is not representative of the whole population, but the collected results do offer interesting insight regarding the youth use of social media and the differences between genders. In other words the current results are reflective only on the sample mentioned above.

Feedback was collected after the completion of the questionnaire and the instrument underwent several changes from its initial form. The collected information provided the necessary support to consolidate the applied method and therefore to provide essential results.

The questionnaire is split between questions which cater to the main themes of this research. The first part provides socio demographic data in regards to the teenagers age, year in school, theoretical program and gender. The second part of the questionnaire concerns itself with general information regarding the type of devices they own and which ones they use most frequently, the amount of time and how often they surf the internet and what type of social media platforms they use. The third part is concerned with the type of content they post and consume, and the fourth one looks at the identity and the way it is exposed online and offline. In order to ensure that this questionnaire has the desired levels of validity and reliability a Cronbach's alpha test was applied. The end results of this questionnaire's internal reliability is the value of 0.65, which according to Field (2009) is considered a moderately acceptable value, but not a desirable one. Still, as 'the value of α depends on the number of items on the scale' and this is just a pilot test with a limited number of items available, further analysis is required in order to see what would be the appropriate steps to improve this value (Field, 2009: 675). Taking into consideration that this stage of this research does not intend to do any hypothesis testing and it is only interested in presenting the overall aspect in regards to youth gender identity and the differences in online behaviour, this aspect is not seen as being an impediment in the presentation of the findings.

The data analysis in this stage is being fulfilled through the support of the IBM SPSS Statistics version 26, as it offers all the necessary descriptive analysis tools necessary to create a perspective on the collected data, which is presented through the forms of various types of charts. These are used as a visual incentive to better grasp the inner workings of the existing data. SPSS is used to give more detailed descriptions of the current data and also to provide, through crosstabs, a clear visual perspective of the possible differences which might occur between male and female

teenagers. As mentioned above, the total number of students who agreed to participate and answer the questionnaires is 495 high school students (165 male and 330 female) all from urban high schools from the North-East region of Romania. The current cultural context in which this research transpires is considered to be quite conservatory and religious. Due to this, there are some concerns regarding the main themes of the research as the teenagers might adjust their answers to fit what is considered by them the pro-social requirements (Endendijk et al, 2019, Goffman, 1959). Although this is the underlying concern, the existing result in regards to gender binary associations vary.

The majority answered the questions as was estimated, but still the answers were quite dispersed. This raises several questions concerning the nature of these answers and whether there could be more underlying elements which need to be explored in the focus group sessions.

After the data was imported in SPSS and the codebook was created, the necessary steps in the process of analysis were taken as they were specified in Bryman (2012). All of the variables measured in this study have collected qualitative data. They are categorical variables which hold nominal values (Kaliyadan & Kulkarni, 2019). The independent variable is gender while the main dependent variable of interest is online activity. The data collected by Google forms was downloaded and was imported into SPSS 26 where it was coded and values were added. The nominal variables which were recorded as being string types of data were subjected to automatic re-coding. The next section takes on the data in the order in which the questionnaire was designed, presents it according to Bryman's suggestions, and then provides an overview analysis combined with the next steps and the conclusions collected from this stage. The questionnaire was constructed and sent out to the respondents in Romanian. The codebook and the presented data were translated into English once the data collection process was finalised by the researcher. The first section that is presented provides a quick look at the demographic relevant for this analysis.

3.1.1. Demographics

The main demographics of interest that are explored in the further sections as well are gender and the age in years of the respondents. These aspects are presented with the intention of providing support for the reader in order to have a better view and understanding of the subsections which are following. This section,

as mentioned above, also collected other types of data concerning the insurance that the representatives are indeed high schoolers such as the grade they are in and the theoretical program they belong to. These variables do not have any real significance in the overall analysis as the data and, as the questionnaire was distributed online, solely functioned as an extra assurance that the respondents belong to the desired population. The first table presented below (Table 1) offers a view on the gender and age distribution.

Table 1 – Gender and Age Distribution

*Gender * Age in Years Crosstabulation*

			Age in Years					Total
			15	16	17	18	19	
Gender	Male	Count	11	33	35	52	34	165
		% within Gender	6.7%	20.0%	21.2%	31.5%	20.6%	100.0%
	Female	Count	33	58	68	117	54	330
		% within Gender	10.0%	17.6%	20.6%	35.5%	16.4%	100.0%
Total		Count	44	91	103	169	88	495
		% within Gender	8.9%	18.4%	20.8%	34.1%	17.8%	100.0%

The figures show that there is a considerable number difference between the male and female respondents. Therefore, this sample is N=495 with 66.7% female. The age mean is M=17.3 with SD=1.2. The participation in this research was presented from the beginning as being completely voluntary and every participant that decided to engage and contribute to it has done it of their own free volition. With this in mind, one could argue that the predominance of one gender and that of certain age groups, such as the 18 year old, could also be an indicator of online presence as well as extensive online activity and involvement in communities or events. There are certain studies that suggest several gender differences in online involvement and identity performance within digital platforms. A more detailed interpretation of the results is offered in the *4.3 Discussions and Conclusions* section of this chapter.

3.1.2. Internet Access

The following subsection presents the data collected concerning the type of digital devices teenagers use and how often they go online. There is increasing concern over the frequency and the amount teenagers spend in the digital space, as well as their over

digitalization of their bodies by implementing a number of digital devices in their day to day lives. In table 2 the data shows what type of digital devices the sample owns and uses. It can be observed that there is overwhelming preference when it comes to digital devices for the smartphone. Nearly the entirety of the sample owns a smartphone as 98.5% have selected it. It can also be observed that 73.7% of them own a laptop, while only 34.5% own a PC. This indicates that personal computers have become devices which are less common with the youth, as they are static when it comes to their location of use, while the laptop provides them with mobility. This can show that laptops have become a preferred device along the smartphone as it provides the users with the ability to connect and be present online regardless of the location or setting. There also is a considerable percentage when it comes to smartwatches with 9.4% of the sample owning one. This device also adds to the need of constant connectivity, online presence and the digitalisation of the body. This device connects to the smartphone and keeps the wearer alert of all their notifications and scans certain health elements such as physical activity and sleep. Game Consoles are also owned and used by 12% of the sample. Gaming has become one of the fastest growing industries that has an impressive grasp on the youth population as it provides more freedom with identity play through the construction of avatars and game characters and by its early on implementation of certain versions of the Metaverse (i.e. Roblox).

Table 2 – Frequency of owned digital devices

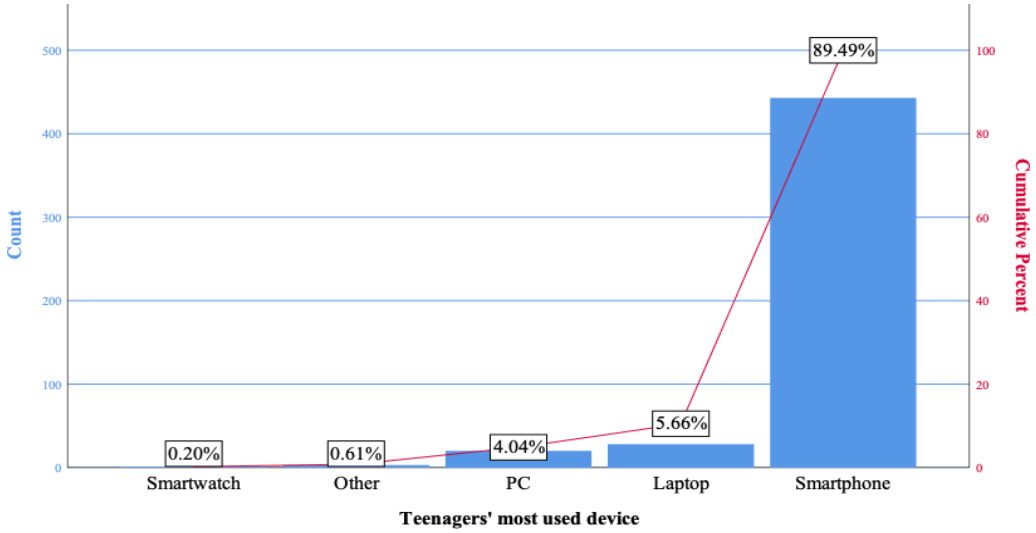
Devices owned by teenagers

		Responses		Percent of
		N	Percent	Cases
Devices owned	Smartphone	460	38.2%	98.5%
	Tablet	114	9.5%	24.4%
	PC	161	13.4%	34.5%
	Laptop	344	28.6%	73.7%
	Smartwatch	44	3.7%	9.4%
	Game Console	56	4.7%	12.0%
	Other	24	2.0%	5.1%
Total		1203	100.0%	257.6%

When it comes to the distribution of these preferences in cross tabulation with gender it shows that the smartphone is owned in equal percentage by both male and female teenagers as 35.6% of males and 39.7% of females selected it. There have been identified certain differences in gender when it comes to the type of digital devices that they own. One considerable difference that stands out

is the fact that 19.6% of the males own a PC while 10% of females have one. A similar disparity in ownership is observed when it comes to the laptop as 25% of males and 30.6% of females own one. Differences are also observed when it comes to the smartwatch and the game console as well, but of a relatively smaller percentage, as 4.2% males and 3.3% females own a smartwatch and 5.9% male and 4% female own a game console. These differences could suggest a more digitally inclined ownership of the male gender over the female, but it also shows that certain devices are more preferred by some genders over the other. A follow up question was addressed in order to see if there is a preferred digital device which they use the most to go online. The same items were given as options for them to answer. In the Pareto chart (figure 1) below it can be seen that 89.4% use and prefer the smartphone as the device they use to go online. This is followed by the laptop with 5.6% and the PC with 4.04%. These preferences are observed in both male and female teenagers, which indicates that the mobility and ease of online access is a key factor in the choosing and using of the digital device.

Figure 1 – Devices that are used most often by teenagers



This data also complies with multiple findings from other studies, as the next section is showing. This is especially evident when it comes to the amount of time both male and female teenagers spend online or at least access the internet. This can be seen in the next table and figure which illustrate that a great percentage of both boys and girls stated that they spend daily and long hours navigating the web or on social media platforms. As the

bar chart below suggests, the great majority of both boys and girls are engaging on a daily basis in various online activities, while a small portion of the sample state that they have a more sparing online activity. Out of the 495 respondents it is interesting to observe that not one of them chose a lower case than a couple of times a week, which still implies that the internet is an instrumental part of their daily lives. Out of the whole sample, 97.2% (481 respondents) have stated that they go online multiple times during the day. These findings fit in with the results found by the research projects presented in this paper and this provides a more solid base that the collected data is valid. This result also pinpoints that portable digital devices, such as smartphones, are predominantly preferred by the sample as they are mobile and provide easy internet access, and it also shows that the amount they spend online is considerable.

Figure 2 – Gender distribution of internet access

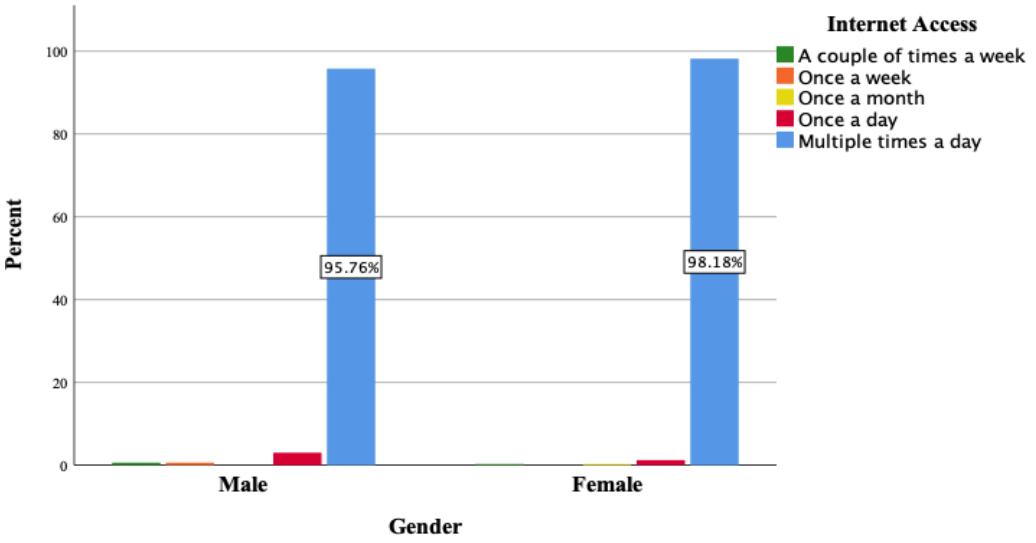


Table 3 – Internet access entire sample frequency

Internet Access

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Multiple times a day	481	97.2	97.4	97.4
	Once a day	9	1.8	1.8	99.2
	A couple of times a week	2	.4	.4	99.6
	Once a week	1	.2	.2	99.8
	Once a month	1	.2	.2	100.0
	Total	494	99.8	100.0	
Missing	6	1	.2		
Total		495	100.0		

These figures also represent that the internet, or better said the online space, represents a daily activity from their normal routines that are integrated the way they live their lives. Moreover, it has become a part of the manner in which they view reality and the way social structures are created for them. These statistical values could indicate that a considerable amount of the sample are active digital citizens and have a developed online presence and identity.

3.1.3. Social Media

Social media is one of the key factors studied within this research. The section within the questionnaire dedicated to it begins with the item related to whether the respondents had accounts on different social media platforms. Out of the entire sample, 99% stated that they have a social media account while only 1% said they did not (Table 4). Those who do not have an account were directed to question 19, but under closer inspection it was shown that even those who initially said they do not have one went on to answer the next questions related to which social media platforms they use to engage in social activities and have an active presence.

Table 4 – Social media account

SNSs Profile

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	490	99.0	99.0	99.0
	No	5	1.0	1.0	100.0
	Total	495	100.0	100.0	

The next part of the questionnaire takes a more niche focus on the type of social media platforms the youth use to develop and construct their identities as well as the type of content they consume while they surf the web. Concerning the question, 'what social media platforms do they use and how much time they spend on them?' the collected data provides an overall of their platform preferences and in regards to the amount of time they spend on them. The first question provided the respondent the ability to choose multiple platforms on which they have accounts. The collected data shows that 97.4% of cases have a Facebook account. This is closely followed by Instagram which 94.7% of the cases chose as a platform on which they have an active account. The table below shows that a considerable percentage of cases are registered for the majority of the social media platforms given as options. This suggests that a considerable proportion of the sample has a spread out online presence over several platforms that provide a wide array

of tools and options that aid the users in constructing their versions of identity and self presentation. These platforms also provide different content, specific to certain hobbies or interests, such as Twitch which is known for being a platform for gamers where games are streamed. YouTube is also a different type of platform as it is mostly focused on video type content and requires a more niche, scripted and edited type of content. Snapchat rose to popularity due to the options they gave their users regarding communication, as the messages and the pictures which were sent would be deleted the following day. This sort of strategy was also implemented into Facebook and Instagram, as a tool known as stories. The following data further implies that teenagers are highly engaged within the online space and created their own spaces on various platforms from where they travel in between them. The complete array of platforms which the respondent uses is presented in the following table.

Table 5 – Social media platforms on which teenagers have active accounts

Social media platform Frequencies				
		Responses		Percent of
		N	Percent	Cases
Social media platforms	Facebook	478	20.7%	97.4%
	Instagram	465	20.2%	94.7%
	Snapchat	364	15.8%	74.1%
	TikTok	286	12.4%	58.2%
	YouTube	440	19.1%	89.6%
	Twitter	99	4.3%	20.2%
	Twitch	64	2.8%	13.0%
	Other	111	4.8%	22.6%
Total		2307	100.0%	469.9%

This research intended to focus on the most used platform by teenagers on which they engage with the tools necessary for identity formation and development. In order to establish which of all the ones presented is the one that the youth use most often, a follow up question was employed with the same options as the previous question. The bar chart and the cross- tabulation table below offer two perspectives on the most popular social media platform among the entire sample, while the second chart offers a perspective on this result through the lens of gender. It can be observed that although in the previous item the platform which was recorded as being the one with the most accounts held by the youth was Facebook, when asked which they use most often, Instagram received the most answers with 56.7% of the sample choosing it.

Facebook does follow Instagram with 18.99% of the sample using it the most often, but the discrepancy between the two is quite significant.

Figure 3 – The most used social media platform by teenagers

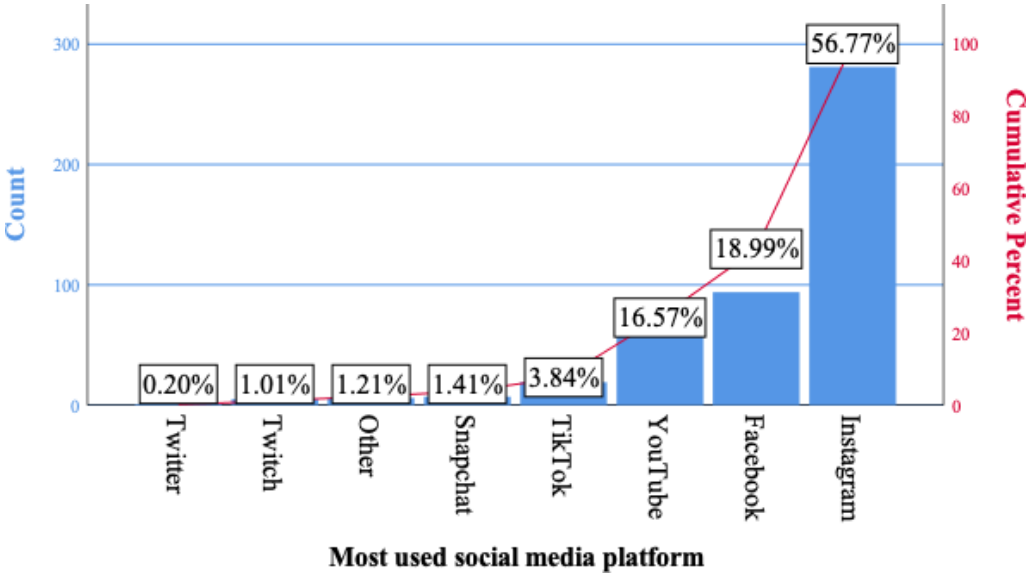


Table 6 – Most used social media platform distributed by gender

*Gender * Most used platform Crosstabulation*

			Most used platform				
			Facebook	Instagram	Snapchat	TikTok	YouTube
Gender	Male	Count	33	67	2	4	51
		% within Gender	20.0%	40.6%	1.2%	2.4%	30.9%
	Female	Count	61	214	5	15	31
		% within Gender	18.5%	64.8%	1.5%	4.5%	9.4%
Total		Count	94	281	7	19	82
		% within Gender	19.0%	56.8%	1.4%	3.8%	16.6%

The table above shows that the popularity of Instagram can be found in both genders as 40.6% of males and 64.8% of females have chosen it. While there is a gender consensus when it comes to Instagram, the preference for the other platforms fluctuates. The biggest difference can be spotted with Twitch, where none of the girls chose it and 3% of the boys did. As discussed above Twitch is a platform which is known for live streaming playthroughs. This result is interesting as certain studies argue that the gender difference could be due to aggression and gate keeping rather than

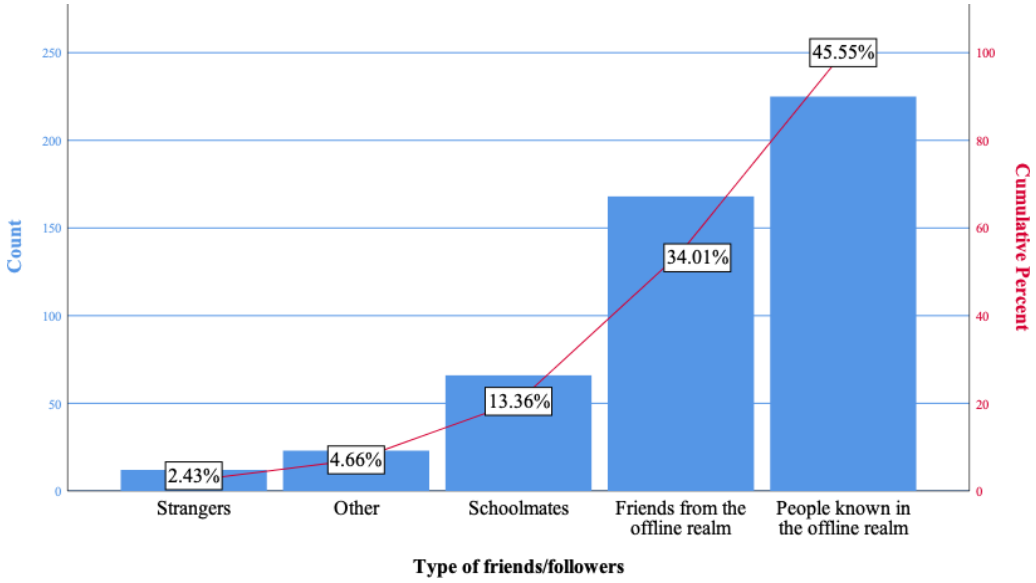
lack of interest. Being a platform heavily associated with gaming and online gaming content, Twitch is often seen in the academic sphere and is usually culturally associated as being more of a 'cisgendered, straight, white, and male' activity and space (Woodcock & Johnson, 2019:324). This aspect is not explored in detail in this book but could represent an attractive venue in further research. A similar result could also be noticed in the use of YouTube, where 30.9% of males chose it as their most used social media platform while only 9.4% of females chose it. Another result which stands out in this table and which could be explored in future research projects is that 1.8% of males and 0.9% of females stated that the most used social media platform is something other than the options presented to them. In this research it was not prioritised to uncover these answers but they could represent a result worth the further development and inquiry of it. The rest of the values are similar in both of the gender samples.

3.1.4. Digital privacy

A concern that can be found in the grand majority of youth behaviour in online settings is that of safety and risk minimization. This aspect is also necessary to capture as it can represent significant elements of online literacy, awareness of the nature of the online space, as the content, if it is left public, can be seen and interpreted by any kind of audience. This element could represent a complete loss of context and therefore no real control over the impression management process. The results were analysed first for the entirety of the sample and after it was cross tabulated with the gender variable. More than half of the sample (52%) stated that they keep their social media accounts private, an action which gives them some control over who their audience is and, due to that, they also have better control over their identity performance and the type of content they post. Partially private accounts were chosen by 18% of the entire sample. This function implies that the people who are connected to those who are allowed to view the profile can also do that even though they have not been given direct permission to do so. A slightly higher percentage (29.4%) have their social media profiles public, which means that anyone can view their profile and contact them without any restrictions. This aspect was also analysed in relation to gender. The results show that 52.1% of males and 52.9% of females have their account privacy settings set to private, 18.2% of males and 17.9% of females have them set to partially private and 29.7% of males and 29.2% of females to public.

These results show a similar attitude on behalf of both genders concerning online privacy settings and the manner in which they choose their audiences. In regards to the type of security settings teenagers have on their social media account, a follow up question was addressed concerning who their followers (Instagram) or friends (Facebook) on these platforms are. Almost half of the respondents (45.5%) tested that the people who are following their online activities and posts are people who they know in the offline realm. A considerable part of the sample also stated (33.9%) that the people following them are their friends from their physical life. Only 2.4% stated that their friends online are complete strangers to them and 4.6% have listed other types of online acquaintances than those listed. The Pareto chart below offers a visual representation of the results presented.

Figure 4 – The profile of the youth's online audience



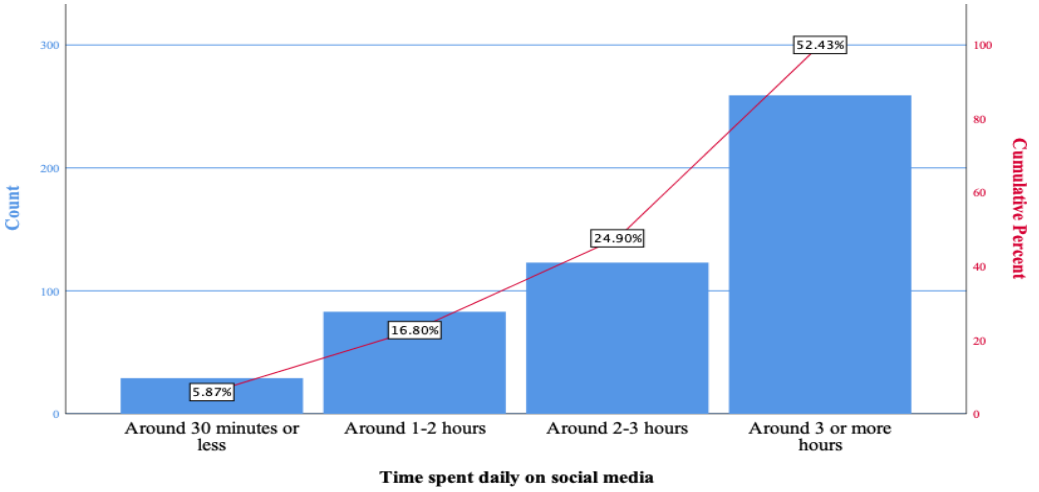
An analysis concerning the variable of gender was also executed and it showed that the results were evenly distributed in the sense that 48.9% of females and 38.8% of males stated that the majority of friends and followers that they have are people they know from the online realm. A similar result was registered concerning the next item, meaning that 37.6% of males and 32.2% of females stated that they are followed by and have friends on these platforms which they know in real life. Schoolmates were also chosen by 13.9% of males and 13.1% of females. This shows that teenagers use the online environment mostly as an extension of the

offline environment. By creating a similar social context in both environments, identity performance can be more easily managed as the overall audience maintains its construction.

3.1.5. Time spent on social media

The amount of time they spend on these platforms is also an interesting aspect to examine in order to grasp the intensity and role these platforms play within the teenager's life. As it can be seen in Figure 5, when asked about this, more than half (52.4%) stated that they spend more than 3 hours being engaged in social media sites throughout the day. A considerable percentage (24.9%) also stated that they spend around 2-3 hours, 16.8% around 1-2 hours and 5.87% around 30 minutes or less on social media sites on a daily basis. This shows that the majority of the sample spends a considerable amount of time on these social media platforms which can further support the arguments that the youth live their lives simultaneously being online and offline.

Figure 5 – Time spent on social media platforms per day



This variable was also looked at in cross tabulation with gender and it showed that out of the 52.4% of the sample who spends around 3 or more hours online, 57% were females and 43.3% were male. On the other side of the spectrum, 9.8% of boys and 3.9% of girls spend less than 30 minutes on social media on a daily basis. This percentage is highly interesting, especially due to the sample gender disparity, as it begs the question whether boys spend less time on social media sites then girls do. This aspect is further analysed in the next section.

The questions that followed were focused on the frequency of posts they make on these platforms and the type of media they chose to post most often. These were also addressed in order to better understand the behavioural patterns that teens display in the online verse and the differences that can be captured in relation to gender and identity performance. Similar to the previous question discussed, they were asked about the frequency of their posts on the social media platforms they chose previously. Only 6.9% of the sample stated that they post something every day, 14.9% post once every couple of days, 15.4% post once a week, and 24.4% post once a month. The most picked answer by the sample was rarer than once a month with 38.2%, which indicates that a significant proportion of the sample is not highly active in regards to digital content production. The distribution in relation with gender shows that females post and are more active in digital content production and in displays of identity in the online space as it is shown in the table below, 4.8% of males and 7.9% of females post every day, 10.3% of males and 17.3% of females post every couple of days, 9.1% of males and 18.5% of females post once a week, 20% of males and 26.7% of females post once a month and 55.8% of males and 29.5% of females post rarer than once a month. Although the last percentages might seem widely dispersed from one another it is necessary to also observe the count between them, as it shows that the number of answers are not so widely different from each other. Even though the last value might not be a clear representation of posting habit differences between the two groups, the count values do provide a more accurate representation. These show that, throughout the whole items, girls appear to be more active posters then boys are on the previously presented social media platforms.

Table 7 – Frequency of social media posts in relation to gender

*Gender * Frequency of posts Crosstabulation*

			Frequency of posts			
			Every day	Once every couple of days	Once a week	Once a month
Gender	Male	Count	8	17	15	33
		% within Gender	4.8%	10.3%	9.1%	20.0%
	Female	Count	26	57	61	88
		% within Gender	7.9%	17.3%	18.5%	26.7%
Total		Count	34	74	76	121
		% within Gender	6.9%	15.0%	15.4%	24.5%

The type of posts teenagers make the most was also measured. This factor represented a necessity in pinpointing, in respects with

the existing sample, as the final stage was initially intending in analysing their most posted content in order to establish and create a clearer frame regarding the youths' gender identity performance in the digital space and its impact on the way digital content is constructed and presented. The collected data shows that 79.4% of the entire sample most often posts photos, followed by only 10.3% of those who stated that they most often post messages. Even looking at the data in relation to gender there is an overwhelmingly consensus amount of both boys and girls as 82.7% of females and 73.3% of males stated that they post photos most often. This result helped decide the final stage of this research as it focuses solely on the photographic content posted by teens on their Instagram/Facebook account. These two have been chosen as being the field for digital data collection as they have been the top two platforms chosen by the sample. Further details concerning this aspect are given in the next chapter which focuses fully on the collected focus group qualitative data.

3.1.6. Online content consumption

In this subsection presents the overall manners and reasons teenagers engage in social media activities. It also looks at the type of content they consume online and if they follow any influencers. In this research influencers are seen as people who actively produce niche or theme focused content and which have a considerably big following. These people usually market a certain type of lifestyle, a specific gender identity performance, beliefs, values and certain products. These elements are seen as an important aspect to explore as it provides a clearer direction which the next research stages can take and focus on. Table 8 shows the whole representation of responses given by the entirety of the sample. It provides a good view on the type of activities teenagers engage with and the practices they have adopted on a regular basis in the online space. As it illustrates below, it can be noticed that the items which have been selected the most are music with 85.1% of cases and movies, TV series, anime, YouTube clips with 83.3% of cases. This shows that the majority of the sample use the internet for entertainment purposes and to explore certain interests. The item which received little attention, in comparison with the rest, was celebrity news which was selected by 18.7% of the cases. This aspect could show that teenagers are less interested in aspects which do not contribute to their direct personal development or to their hobbies and interests. This can be observed by looking at the

selected values for games as 35.2% of the cases chose it as an activity they often partake in in the online environment. Similarly, it is also fashion which was selected by 30.3% of cases, and that can indicate an exploration of interests and perspectives, while other aspects such as celebrity culture and news might not be an area of intense interest for the youth. Still, it is not worth setting aside these values as it was picked by a considerable number of cases. Another item that stands out is that related to school work and education. Out of the entire sample 39.1% of cases have chosen and affirmed that a considerable amount of time they spend in the online environment is dedicated to their education.

Table 8 – The most frequent type of online content consumed

Digital content consumption Frequencies

		Responses		Percent
		N	Percent	of Cases
Type of digital content that is consumed by teenagers	News	157	7.5%	32.0%
	Music	418	20.0%	85.1%
	Movies, TV series, anime, YouTube clips	409	19.6%	83.3%
	Celebrity News	92	4.4%	18.7%
	Sport	103	4.9%	21.0%
	Technology	127	6.1%	25.9%
	Fashion	149	7.1%	30.3%
	Information about hobbies	178	8.5%	36.3%
	Games	173	8.3%	35.2%
	Educational information for school	192	9.2%	39.1%
	Other	88	4.2%	17.9%
Total		2086	100.0%	424.8%

Due to the fact that one of the key questions this research is trying to answer is if there are any key differences between the two sexes which are explored, the type of content consumption that can be found concerning them is considered especially salient. Although until this point there have been some key differences identified between male and female teenagers, it can be argued that overall both genders engage and spend considerable amounts of time on the internet through the help of various ICTs, most especially through smartphones. In this sense it seems that the phone has become a very close and special tool for the users, as it has indeed become an extension of the physical human body, more than any other type of technology. The differences in the way boys and girls engage with social and new media is visible in the type of content they consume while they are surfing the web. Teenage girls and boys apparently have similar consumption habits, as both males

and females have high values when it comes to watching movies or listening to music, as 81.7% of boys and 86.9% of girls state that they most frequently listen to music online and 83.5% of boys and 83.2% of girls most frequent watch movies, TV series, anime, YouTube clips.

Table 9 – Gender differences in online content consumption

*Digital content consumption*Gender Crosstabulation*

			Gender		Total
			Male	Female	
Type of digital content that is consumed	News	Count	60	97	157
		% within Gender	36.6%	29.7%	
	Music	Count	134	284	418
		% within Gender	81.7%	86.9%	
	Movies, TV series, anime, YouTube clips	Count	137	272	409
		% within Gender	83.5%	83.2%	
	Celebrity News	Count	17	75	92
		% within Gender	10.4%	22.9%	
	Sport	Count	57	46	103
		% within Gender	34.8%	14.1%	
	Technology	Count	76	51	127
		% within Gender	46.3%	15.6%	
	Fashion	Count	17	132	149
		% within Gender	10.4%	40.4%	
	Information about hobbies	Count	56	122	178
		% within Gender	34.1%	37.3%	
	Games	Count	101	72	173
		% within Gender	61.6%	22.0%	
	Educational information for school	Count	58	134	192
		% within Gender	35.4%	41.0%	
	Other	Count	35	53	88
		% within Gender	21.3%	16.2%	
Total		Count	164	327	491

Similarities in the type of online content both boys and girls consume can also be observed in the consumption of information regarding current affairs or information for education as 36.6% of males and 29.7% of females selected the news category and 35.4% of males and 41% of females chose the educational information for school category. The online content consumption and gender cross tabulation table (table 9) from above reveals in a translucent manner the differences between genders. These appear when the options capture a possible gender sub note, meaning that they are the clearest in the context in which certain subjects are more traditionally associated with a specific sex. This can be seen when it comes to consuming content in relation to subjects such as fashion, where the boys scored 10.4% while girls scored 40.5%.

Similarly, it can be observed that an akin situation can be noticed when it comes to technology related content which shows that 46.3% of boys answered that they consume this type of content frequently, while only 15.6% of girls chose this item. The same can be observed when it comes to online games, as the recorded values show that 61.6% of males stated that they frequently play games while only 22% of females stated the same thing. This might show and indicate that the mainstream perspective on what certain gendered behaviours and preferences are seen as appropriate, might become incorporated by the teens in regards to their front stage performance.

With respect to the main reasons why teenagers go into the online environment and perform their various identities, a multiple choice item was addressed. To this, the general sample selected the communicate with friends category with 90.6% of cases. This shows that the digital space is an extension of the existing social environment that the youth engage with in the physical realm. This makes the context in which the stage is set more manageable which in turn makes it more manageable for the youth to engage with impression management tactics. There is still some uncertainty as the openness of the internet still does not ensure a complete control over one's audience and therefore over their identity performance. Regarding another category that was chosen, when asked about the main reasons or motivation for attending and adopting digital practices, 48.3% chose for attending and participating in groups related to school. There were some cases (21%) which also stated that one of the motivators for an online presence is the options of self expression. This could indicate that the aspect of online self expression is an important aspect which teenagers are aware of and reflect on. In this case, 16.5% of the sample chose the category stating that the reason they go online is to have an online presence. The results show an indication of the fact that, for the overall sample, being online has a complex set of motives and it adds to different aspects of their social and educational life. These results were also set in cross tabulation with the gender variable in order to see if there are any gross differences between the two sexes and to indicate any further questions or steps that require attention in the next research stages. The table below provides a visual cue to the main set of the items presented above and it highlights the gender aspect as it pinpoints the variability between the two categories.

Table 10 – Gender differences concerning the reasons teenagers go online

*Motivations*Gender Crosstabulation*

			Gender		Total
			Male	Female	
Reasons youth use social media	To communicate with friends	Count	140	305	445
		% within Gender	85.4%	93.3%	
	To express my individuality	Count	19	84	103
		% within Gender	11.6%	25.7%	
	To have an online presence	Count	31	50	81
		% within Gender	18.9%	15.3%	
	For the groups related to schools	Count	65	172	237
		% within Gender	39.6%	52.6%	
	Other	Count	49	61	110
		% within Gender	29.9%	18.7%	
Total		Count	164	327	491

Table 10 shows that concerning the particularities when integrating the gender variable in the mix and compared to the previously presented result there is not much variance in the values. The communicate with friends category was chosen by 85.4% of males and 93.3% of females. This could indicate, as previously mentioned, that for both boys and girls the social scape in which they move and the online space provides an extension for that environment. Another item which shows considerable contrast between the two genders is the category related to one's online expression. Meaning that 11.6% of males and 25.7% of women stated that one of the reasons they have to go online is to express their individuality. Having an online presence seems to be a motivator for online activity as 18.9% of males and 15.3% of females chose it. A considerable difference is also noticed related to the -For groups related to school- category as 39.6% of males and 52.6% of females have selected it. This might also be an indication of social involvement in maintaining both an educational identity and the necessity of interacting with the group. Gender might also be a big indicator for this difference as there might be more social expectation and pressure for girls to be serious and involved with their studies and peers.

Influencers are a key aspect of the online social environment. They form communities who share the same interest or the same ideological and cultural perspectives. In this research they are seen as a potential aspect which can support and help see the ways in which culturally supported gendered behaviours have been transferred into the online, and therefore influence the manner in

which teenagers construct their content. When asked about this, 69.2% of the entire sample said that they follow influencers and 30.8% said that they did not. In the same line of thought as the previously presented results, this variable has been viewed also in relation with the gendered variable which showed that 59.8% of males and 74% of females follow influencers (see table 11). This implies that certain types of content creators and therefore content has become part of their daily digital lives. The ideological aspects of hegemonic thought might imply that the constant contact with a specific type of thought and content might have direct influences on the youths interpretation of cultural and social aspects regarding the physical world. In this sense, 74.29% of the entire sample stated that they do not feel the content they produce is in any way influenced by the influencers they follow. When looking at the way this percentage is distributed by gender, the results showed that 81.6% of males and 70.6% of females believe that their content is not impacted in any manner by the type of influencers they follow.

Table 11- Following influencers

*Gender * Following influencers Crosstabulation*

			Following influencers		Total
			Yes	No	
Gender	Male	Count	98	66	164
		% within Gender	59.8%	40.2%	100.0%
	Female	Count	242	85	327
		% within Gender	74.0%	26.0%	100.0%
Total		Count	340	151	491
		% within Gender	69.2%	30.8%	100.0%

To further this perspective and to see how teenagers felt about their online image, gender identity display, content production process, and the differences between their online and offline identities, together with the effects they have on their development and performance, a set of 10-point Likert scale type data were administered. The first item of this type was related to the manner in which teenagers construct their photographic content before they post it on social media platforms. The statement for this item referred to the fact that the published content is always edited before post. The mode for this item was 10 and the median was 6. When looking at the distribution of the answers based on the gender of the respondents, the data showed that the majority of answers were given by both genders over the fifth point. This shows that both boys and girls tinker with their photographic content before they make it public. The tenth point (fully agree) was selected

by 17.6% of boys and 18.5% of girls, while the first point (do not agree) was selected by 12.1% of boys and 8.2% of girls. This indicates that exterior appearance might be of a more important value for girls, as they might feel external pressure about maintaining a certain standard of physicality and appearance. Still, the percentages offered by the boys should not be ignored as they also have the potential of pinpointing external pressures to adhere to a certain standard regarding their physical appearance and attitude.

The next Likert type scale looks at the way in which teenagers construct their online identities and if they are in line with their offline identities. First, the mode and the median were calculated, which were 9 and 10 respectively. The statement which was addressed was concerned whether the online image was the same as the offline one. This was calculated in cross tabulation with the gender variable. The majority of responses by both genders were above the fifth point which shows that the majority of teenagers, regardless of their gender, feel that they managed to transfer a mirrored version of their offline identities into the online. The tenth point (fully agree) was selected by 17.6% of boys and 18.5% of girls. This could indicate that the youth feel that they are performing their authentic selves in the online environment. This can also be supported by the fact that the percentage of selection for the first point is 12.1% of boys and 9.5% of girls, which stated that they do not agree that their online identity matches their offline one.

In a similar train of thought, the next scale looked at how important teenagers' online image is for them. The mode and median for this item were also calculated and both came to the value 5. When the values in reaction to the respondents' gender were calculated, it showed that there is a difference in the way the online image is valued between genders, as the highest percentage recorded by boys was 18.2 % of the first item (do not agree), while the highest item recorded by girls was the 16.2% which have chosen eight (on the agree spectrum). This could show that when it comes to public image there is a higher pressure to perform up to a certain standard for girls rather than boys. The next two and final items which were addressed in the questionnaire are related to whether the respondents identify with what they post and whether their gender identity aligns with them. The mode and median were calculated for both items. The item regarding alignment with one's online image had a mode of 10 and a median of 8, while the following item had both a mode and a median of 10. Both cases imply that respondents have a strong agreement to the statements.

The item regarding identification with the posts made reveals the fact that the highest item selected was the tenth (fully agree) where 32.1% of boys and 34.7% of girls selected it. Similar results were found in the next item – that is about whether the users' posts are in accordance with their gender identity- where 40% of boys and 55.5% of girls selected the tenth item (fully agree). This shows that a considerable part of the overall sample believes that their online content is in alignment with and reflects their gender identity. This item represents the finality of the questionnaire and of the results presented. The next section dives into the discussions and conclusions of the presented results.

This body of work also looks at what appropriate steps the results and their interpretation provide for the following stages of data collection within this research project. As intended from the get go, this stage was intended to explore the existing sample and their habits and behaviours in the online space, the meaning that this environment has for them and the way they engage in gender identity performance tactics. In a congruent fashion to the manner in which the results were presented, the data offered is exposed to interpretation. As a first observation of the data as a whole, it can be argued that social media platforms and the internet represent 'an integral part of adolescents' daily media diet' and it impacts an array of domains of their lives (de Lenne et al., 2020:54). On a global scale, the use of the internet and the platforms, previously mentioned in the *Literature Review* chapter, has steadily increased in the last couple of years and social media sites represent one of the multiple facets of the internet which have managed to fully integrate themselves in the social fabric of modern society. According to Ali & Qamar's (2021) research, the current global trends regarding internet use show that over 4 billion people out of the entire population are connected to the digital landscape, while over 3 billion have social media accounts. Teenagers are seen by the majority of social research studies as being the population with the 'highest rates of social media use of

any age group' (Hausmann et al., 2017:714).

There is an extensive body of research which shows and adheres to the statements that the digital landscape has provided the individuals with multiple opportunities and spaces in which they can explore, customise and develop identities while opting for miscellaneous levels of possible anonymity (Asmamaw et al., 2021). These activities are made possible through the use of multiple platforms (i.e., online games such as Roblox), not just social media ones. Social media platforms, unlike others, provide the opportunity

to create something similar to an extension of the identities presented in the offline environment which provides further chances of play and performance of something that already has a base build. Social media platforms give their users the opportunity to develop, share, innovate and exchange a multitude of information in real time, which according to the study done by Asmamaw et al. (2021) have the potential to aid and to revolutionise various fields and institutions of the current social environment (such as health care). These platforms, as shown even in this research's results, have become an essential tool in daily communications and information distribution. They capture and affect areas that are beyond the realm of identity formation and self performance of individuals from communities and groups in which they thrive, in regards to their preferences in content consumption, education (i.e., school groups) or profession. This shows that the online space has infiltrated not only the social aspects of everyday life, but also the ones from the professional, educational or other types of institutional relevant areas of current social life. As it is presented in this section it can be seen that the results of this stage of the research also reflect the findings of the multitude of studies done concerning these aspects.

Internet access for teenagers and children has become a hot topic anew with the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, as this subject became an important aspect in providing children from every socio-economic background with the means necessary to be able to participate in the social and educational activities appropriate and obligatory to their age group. This aspect has been a hot topic in research for years as it represents a sociologically interesting area of inquiry in observing the way in which the younger generation uses this medium. The Pew Research Centre (2018) research showed that in the US 95% of teenagers between the ages 13-17 use smartphones and 45% of them are online constantly. The report published by Statista (2018) in the same year further supports these statements as they uncover that 88% of teenagers between the same age groups as presented above (13-17) have access to digital devices which offer internet access such as laptops and PCs. These results match the ones collected and presented in the Being young in Europe today (2019) report published by Eurostat, which as it was presented before, shows that in the 27-EU states 94% of the youth population between the ages of 16-29 'made daily use of the internet, compared with 77% for the whole population' (Eurostat, 2019). The EU Kids Online (2020) report, which collected data from 19 countries including Romania, shows the difference in internet access between 2010 and 2020 of children between the

ages of 9-16 (Smahel et al., 2020). In Romania in 2010 the report states that only 2% of this population had access to the internet while in 2020 this percentage rose to 89%. These results reflect and match the ones collected in this research project as it was shown above, 98.5% of the entire sample owns a smartphone and 89.49% use it more often than any other type of devices. The results also fit in the existing field of study when it comes to internet access as 97.2% of the entire sample access and use the internet multiple times a day. These data also present the evolution of the way the internet integrated itself in the lives of young people over the past decade. It also shows that the internet has a predominant omnipresence in youth's daily activities in multiple parts of the globe, allowing them through digital devices, such as smartphones, to be active and engage in both the physical and the digital space at the same time. The smartphone seems to be the preferred digital device for younger age groups regardless of the cultural, socio-economic and geographic context.

There is an overwhelming consensus in the social sciences that, when it comes to internet use and the type of sites adolescents go to, social media sites are centre stage. This, as it was presented in previous chapters, is mostly due to the characteristic of the adolescent period, as the process of developing and creating various identities is central to this period of life. Quintessential questions regarding the self and the direction one wants to go in life, as well as the roles they are willing to take are typical features of adolescence (Weinstein, 2017). In the contemporary digital age the process of identity formation has increasingly grown to involve the definition of the self in online contexts. During adolescence, as the individual is crossing forward from childhood to adulthood they go through a multitude of 'changes both in terms of biological, psychological, and social, such as adolescent body shape associated with changes in reproductive hormones' (Heng et al., 2020:572). The gravitation toward social media sites during adolescence is an occurrence that is due to the definition of their age group and social needs as they build and articulate their own public persona (Lenhart, 2012). Social networks facilitate social connections and interactions, offer diverse content to be consumed or created and provide the tools necessary for self expression.

Therefore, it is not surprising that these platforms have become an extension to the physical landscape in young people's life who are coming of age in the digital era. In their study, Vanhaelewyn & De Marez (2017) show that 55% of Belgian youth between the ages of 12-19 use at least four social media sites (Vanhaelewyn & De Marez,

2017). These results also reflect the ones presented by the EU Kids online report which shows that within Romanian territory 49% of boys and 48% of girls visit several social media sites daily (Smahel et al., 2020). The multiple and frequent use of social media sites by both girls and boys has been identified even in this research, as the results showed that 99% of the respondents have active social media accounts. When asked directly to name what social media platforms they do have accounts on, the majority said they have a Facebook account being closely followed by Instagram. What is interesting is that although the majority said they have a Facebook account, when asked on which of the two they are more active the majority answered Instagram. This is also supported by other studies as they showed that within this age group and even younger, Facebook as a platform has lost its appeal and it is mostly used for other purposes rather than identity performances and explorations. Because of these results the next research stage is focusing mostly on Instagram, Facebook being taken in consideration only in the case the respondent specifically states that they use it more often than Instagram (Aparicio-Martinez et al., 2020).

Martin et al. (2018) research reflects these statements that adolescents present strong preference for Instagram as the main platform in which they have the most activity. Studies such as Shane-Simpson et al., 2018; Lowe-Calverley et al. (2019); Ichau et al. (2019) and the EU Kids Online (2020) project also indicate that the way social networking sites have been used has changed over time, which lead to children and the youth slowly migrating from Facebook to other platforms such as Instagram and more recently TikTok (Smahel et al., 2020). Instagram, as this research also presented in the results section, is by far the most popular in regards to daily use and activity. As a system, Instagram is constructed as a mobile application which enables the user to share video or photographic content to other users. Thus, users can engage and share experiences with each other through visual means, which through the tools this platform offers can be used edit the images as they 'allow users to adjust individual aspects of their images (e.g., brightness/contrast) or apply a 'filter' to give an image or video clip a particular 'look' (e.g., a vintage sepia effect)' (Lowe-Calverley et al., 2019:1). Meaning that through these features teenagers can construct and create the aesthetic they believe fits the messages and the way in which they want to look (Barry et al., 2012). With this, teens construct their versions of identities as they desire and perform them accordingly. It can be noticed that, as it was presented in previous chapters, Goffman's theory of

dramaturgy fits perfectly as this study's theoretical framework, as the stages constructed by social media platforms such as Instagram have indeed become an extension of the front stage in the offline realm in which adolescents play with various versions of themselves and perform their desired identity. On Instagram adolescents post the photos and the videos they create on their profile walls and they can follow other users' content on their feed, if they choose to follow their activity. They can also post temporary visual messages which are known as stories or reels (short videos with the same structure as TikTok content). Everything that is posted on the wall is visible to the youth's followers and vice versa. The user can comment or like the content they are consuming and others can do the same with the content published by the user. Longobardi et al. (2020) states in their research that there are certain factors which show where does the user stand within the Instagram community in the sense of their position in said community. They identify two indicators which can establish one's standing, the first one being '(1) the number of Instagram followers obtained by the user (i.e., the Instagram follower count) and (2) the number of other Instagram users the user has subscribed to (i.e., the Instagram "following" count)' (Longobardi et al., 2020:1). These aspects were not explored in this stage of the data collection process, but they reflect the overall appeal that the portrayed identity has to the general audience of the individual, and they also could show certain aspects regarding the manner in which teens construct their content in order to fit with the overall communities' standards.

The amount of time adolescents spend on Instagram and social media platforms in general is reflective also in the existing body of research. Meaning that the results presented in the upper section are overall reflected by the previously collected data by other studies concerning this subject. The results collected regarding time spent on social media showed that 53.4% of the respondents do spend 3 hours or more navigating and being active on them. These results seem to be aligned with the 2018 Pew Research report in which over 45% of the respondents stated that they are almost constantly connected to social media platforms (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). The results regarding the motivation behind why teens choose to go online or to have an online presence are also similar. Studies (Lee et al., 2015; Phua et al., 2017; Shane-Simpson et al., 2018; Sheldon and Bryant, 2016; Sheldon et al., 2017, Cauberghe et al., 2020) have postulated that according to the collected data teenagers are motivated to go online so they can interact and be social with their friends (Festl, 2020), to create a self promotion page and to record

or document certain experiences. Instagram is the space which offers them the appropriate environment to do all of these aspects (Ichau et al., 2019).

Concerning the type of content teenagers post, other studies have also pointed (Souza et al., 2015; Anderson & Jiang, 2018) that the type of content most often posted by the youth are photos, or more precisely they post and share "selfies'- photographic self-portraits' which are 'known to generate a lot of interest and follower response' (Lowe-Calverley et al., 2019:1). Some studies also imply that the users have a strong emotional connection to their accounts as they use their Instagram profile to share experiences, to engage in intimate communication with their friends and family and to connect with other users. This aspect is also explored in the next stage of the research as it shows that the type of gender identity presented on their Instagram account is also presented in the offline environment. The results also showed that teens put a lot of effort in these photos and make sure that they are in alignment with their offline personas rather than presenting new ones. A great difference between the two is that, according to the studies presented, the online content is carefully curated in order to present a more idealised version of the offline representations. According to Goffman's theory, individuals take the social information they are given and they try to add it to their performance in order to be seen in a positive light by their audience. Instagram proves to very appropriate for this as it offers all the necessary tools to enhance oneself, but research has also shown that, by engaging 'in "feedback seeking" and "digital status seeking", behaviors on SNS may also have negative consequences on adolescents' psychological wellbeing due to an increased risk of cyber victimization' (Longobardi et al., 2020:2). Tokunaga (2010) defines the concept of cyber victimisation as being the hostile or aggressive content or messages intended to cause harm to an individual, by other individuals or groups, in a repeated and continuous manner through digital means. Within the European context these sorts of online risks have been highly documented and analysed as their occurrence is not a rare amount in the age group of the respondents. Cyber victimisation or bullying might also be the reason why teens might adopt traditional forms of gender identity expression and performance online, as they might fear of being ostracised by their peer group. This research is exploring this aspect further in the next research chapter, as the existing body of data shows that in the European and the US context there is a prevalence of this type of behaviour which spans between 6.5% to 35.4% among youth (Barragán Martin et al., 2021),

out of which females and older teens seem to be the most affected by it (Tsitsika et al., 2015).

This research's main objective is to identify the way in which gender, in the traditional or stereotypical sense, impacts the way teenagers present and perform themselves in the digital environment. Although this stage of the study does not fully capture this aspect, it does aid in capturing and offering an upper view of the gender differences which occur in the current sample. This is best put by Yücel & Rızvanoğlu who state that 'societal stereotypes against specific groups are still affecting a large number of people today and have very complex social roots' and these are difficult to fully present with a quantitative method, but it does contribute in better understanding the existing findings within the field (Yücel & Rızvanoğlu, 2019:352). The data presented in the previous section provide this information, and they fit in the existing research. One section that provides a clear visual of these differences is the one related to the type of content the respondents consume while they are surfing the internet or, better said, while being active on social media. This could especially be observed in the categories such as fashion or online games where boys and girls had significant differences in their choices. These results are also found in Tan et al (2010) as they found that girls showed considerably more interest in online activities such as shopping, while regarding online games, boys scored significantly more. Concerning this aspect, the study about young people's digital lives in the UK presented results that fit with the ones already presented. The study also highlights that boys are more likely to explore new online experiences (Raws, 2022). It is worth considering that these differences might also have something to do with the current social and cultural context in which the data collection process took place, especially if the area is considered a conservatory and religious region. With this in mind there are some concerns that do arise as the themes surrounding the research might instigate the respondents to adjust their answers in order for them to fit in with the prosocial requirements of their environment (Gasser et al., 2012; Endendijk et al., 2019).

Akin to the existing body of literature and research, the results show that there is a considerable difference in gender online activity as the girls seem to be a lot more involved and aware of the digital space than boys are. In the international or, better said, western context there is an abundance of academic literature which encapsulates the inequality and digital gap which occurs with the development and implementation of ICTs in the gendered context. As it is revealed that presence of both males and females in the

online space has been constantly growing since the 2000s which also represents the period in which individuals underwent a considerable change in the manner in which they presented themselves, from anonymous avatars and usernames, to a more accurate if not authentic version of their offline selves. (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Celeste & Shafer, 2001). Although the presence of females in the digital space has risen and, in some cases, might have even surpassed the number of males there is still an imbalance in the manner in which the two choose to present and to reveal certain aspects of themselves, as they might be going against the gender stereotypical behaviour or roles which are socially and culturally assigned. In 2009 the researchers Comber and Colley presented that, although at a societal level females showed an increasing interest in the technological and virtual elements of the digital space, there was a continuation of anxiety and lack of confidence in the way they engaged with them compared to the male counterparts. Although some cultural differences in the manner in which gender and their supposed abilities are perceived, especially in the Romanian territory, as the historic context positioned both males and females in a more equal standing from a professional point of view, these aspects have been in a decline since the 90s as the country began to iterate itself within the western standard (Yücel & Rızvanoğlu, 2019). With this in mind, the results presented in this section fall in line with those collected and presented in the overall EU context.

This chapter set the stage for the following phases in the process of data collection and for helping the tasks of formulating relevant observations and interpretations for the main objective for this research. It pointed out that the findings fit with the present body of literature and it showed that teenagers of both genders are indeed highly involved and aware of the consequences and opportunities of the online realm. The data also shows that they are aware of the impact their posts can have in their real lives and on their reputations, as posts on social media can linger in the collective subconscious and can be accessible for years after the event occurred. Sociological academic literature, such as Goffman's theory of dramaturgy, reveals and aids in the process of comprehending the complexities of identity performance in multiple realms and realities. Researchers who are studying this field argue that these realities state an important fact about the current connected present and the digital future namely that, although people have access to information and the reputation of other individuals with ease, both individuals and organisations must 'take

active steps to manage intrinsic biases because, to a certain extent, it isn't always possible to control first impressions online' (Wiederhold, 2018:591). In this research it was highlighted that for teenagers, both female and male, selected values indicate that their online presentation of self is consistent and trances with their offline performance. The key results were taken and used to form the steps and the guides for the next stage in the research which is presented in the next chapter.

3.2. Focus Group

With the data from the previous chapter in mind, this part of the research picks off as it narrows down further in order to answer the main research questions which were presented in the introduction of this whole project. The quantitative stage of this research showed that there are certain differences in online activity and the way the digital space is viewed by its users. It also showed that there are certain similarities specific to the entire age group which is studied regardless of their gender identity or the context of their socialisation process. The methodology chapter provides a more detailed explanation of the manner in which the data collection tools were developed and the way the data in itself was collected for this particular stage. This chapter adopts a thematic procedure of analysis in order to fully capture and present the manner in which the reposts of the respondents concerning the goal of inquiry fit into the data which was already collected and presented. Therefore, this chapter starts off by presenting the process of coding and the evolution of qualitative data analysis, in order to provide the reader with the necessary tools in order to fully comprehend the process and the results given. The next section dives into the results collected from the seven focus groups which were conducted from August 2020 to April 2021, with a sample of 31 teenagers from the aforementioned age group. As mentioned in the *Methodology Considerations* chapter, the first focus group discussion, which took place in August of 2020, was the only one that took place face-to-face, as a relaxation of the pandemic restrictions allowed this to be done at the time. The discussion took place in a quiet, outdoor environment and drinks, snacks, paper and pens were provided during the session (Krueger & Casey, 2009). The other focus groups discussions were held online and therefore did not go through these types of preparations.

These participants, as it was mentioned in the methodology chapter, have been participants in the first stage of the whole data

collection process, therefore they simply add on to the already presented and interpreted results. The following section is presenting the subthemes and main themes which have been identified and created from the available data. The coding process aided in identifying and developing the sub themes and subsequently the main themes and it helped highlight the main conceptual elements which are present throughout this research. The theoretical framework is present in the process of analysis and data presentation as it shows the meanings teenagers hold for their own and the opposing gender, and it also helps identify the different ways the respondents construct and perform their identity. Impression management is also a concept that is predominant among the findings, as teenagers show a certain anxiety about the way others perceive them and the kind of reputation they could ultimately have. The fact that the guide was split in different sections and it dealt with different aspects of the concerning elements of gender identity considering the manner in which it is performed through digital content, was beneficial in the analysis and the interpretation stages, as it was already structured in a specific fashion. The descriptions of the key codes, sub themes and themes are provided in the next subsection. The last section of this research provides an interpretation of the presented results, compares and looks at both research stages together and sets the results in the existing body of academic literature and scientific studies.

The analysis of the empirical focus group sessions is fully positioned in capturing how do teenagers see the content produced by themselves, the internet as a whole and their experiences on social media (Raby, 2010), while considering the male and female gender which, as it was mentioned in previous chapters, in this research is looked at through the traditional norms and stereotypes in regards to the binary system. As the previous section did not look or investigate the direct impact that the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic had on their online and social media practices and activity, this section has created the focus group guide with this aspect in mind. Therefore, this subject is addressed during the focus group discussion and the results are analysed and presented accordingly with the process presented. After each recording, the files were put in a folder dedicated to each session on an external stick in order to ensure the safety of the data, as the majority of them, with the only exception being the one recorded in August of 2020 which was in an MP3 format, being in video format. The visual aspect of the data helped in better analysing and interpreting the participants'

statements, as body language and facial expression could be revisited as well, rather than relying only on the audio recording. All of the files were taken after each discussion and they were transcribed by only this project's researcher. The transcription for these files was done audio verbatim. An initial coding of the respondents was also done in this stage. The code was created by giving each respondent from a group a number to which the gender and age were added.

Once this process was finalised these transcripts were uploaded in NVivo 12 pro and the analysis process began. The transcripts were subjected to several readings and received separate codes on the basis of the phrases or words participants used during the discussions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The initial coding techniques which were applied were a combination of open coding method and descriptive coding method. The open coding method allows the researcher to grab and code directly from the available text. This technique is also known as in vivo coding, which allows the researcher to grab and code the section of text or the work which seems to be relevant to the research questions and to the process of interpretation. The second technique, meaning the descriptive coding method, was used the most as it provided the necessary support in identifying aspects within the transcript data which refer to the main concerns and inquiries addressed in this research, and as it also gives the researcher the ability to add descriptive codes throughout the available data. These methods were applied twice. Once as a pre-coding and to aid the researcher to become more familiar with the data and secondly in order to revise and set the final codes that were used to identify the sub-themes and themes which were found in the transcript data. These methods were followed by the interpretive coding method which is used to pinpoint and discover certain features of the transcript data, which appear to share a common meaning or experience, and to develop and create a code which helps to interpret these findings. These are used to uncover the main themes or concepts, which the data offer, in order to form an appropriate theory and also to set the next and final steps which are taken in the next research stage and which are presented in the next chapter. The final step which was taken in this data analysis process is that of defining the overarching themes also known as the process of aggregating the identified dimensions. This stage of the data analysis is done and takes place in order to present the final and main themes which are used to characterise the key concepts of this research. These data analysis approaches were

seen as the most appropriate ones to the available body of data and for this study, as they offer the option of creating codes and of developing the final and main themes which remain aligned with the responses the respondents gave, and achieve a close link to the specific context in which the participant resides.

The codes that ended up forming the sub-themes, and essentially the main themes, were the ones that came up in repressive succession as they were considered to be the closest to reflecting an authentic representation of the respondents' experience and views. Meaning that the most frequent codes that appeared through the entire focus groups transcript data were taken in consideration for the next stages of coding. The focus group technique proved to be quite efficient especially for the theoretical framework that this study has adopted. The researcher adopted the position of a guide and of a moderator of the overall discussion and permitting a more unstructured interaction between the respondents. This in itself gave plenty of data when it comes to identity performance and especially gender identity performance, as the youth changed and adopted different behaviours depending on the context and the formation of their group. They each performed their parts while adding to the stage they were building in which each became the audience and the performer. Due to the fact that this technique is used to 'mimic 'real life', with people talking to each other rather than to a researcher, they encourage the use of participants' real vocabularies and ways of talking about the topic (Kitzinger, 1994b; Wilkinson, 1998a) – participants might not feel the need to use the 'correct' terms' (Braun & Clarke, 2013:110). Therefore, the data collection technique, as well as Goffman's theory of dramaturgy, fits perfectly with the overall aims and objectives of this research and, by taking this route to coding in the analysis process, it provided the necessary support in subtracting the themes. There are also supporting studies which state that when it comes to discussion topics which might be sensitive or cause discomfort with children and young people, the use of focus groups has proven to be more effective in the data collection process than one on one interviews, as being part of the collective that tackles the same subject might relax and encourage the subject to speak up about their personal experiences or thoughts (Fox et al., 2007; Braun & Kitzinger, 2001).

Following the specified guidelines for thematic analysis (King & Harrocks, 2010) provides the means necessary in order to describe the available text and to explore and investigate any deeper rooted elements hidden behind the obvious response (Silverman, 2005).

Thematic analysis is often seen as a method used to identify the 'themes and patterns of meaning across a dataset in relation to a research question; possibly the most widely used qualitative method of data analysis, but not 'branded' as a specific method until recently' (Braun & Clarke, 2013:175). To be more specific, as this research already has a theoretical framework which guides the whole research process, it would be appropriate to express that the analysis is more akin to theoretical thematic analysis. The typical theoretical thematic analysis is already led by a theoretical approach and has some defined concepts based on the theory it adopted. In this sense this study is heavily guided by Goffman's dramaturgy theory and the lens it offers from an epistemological perspective. Therefore, by adopting this analysis technique, the trends, activities, habits and perspectives that the youth adopt about the online realm, social media and their gender identity within this space, were identified and articulated from codes to themes. The codes that have communalities were clustered together under a sub theme, and the sub themes which also shared some communality or showed connection were set under a big theme which described the interpreted data.

A paramount aspect which demands to be taken into consideration is the fact that the communalities that led to the creation of the themes, as well as the themes themselves, are not static elements which remain in the same form. These themes tend to evolve as they are further exposed to the process of analysis by the researcher which leads to a grasp of a more complex and intense understanding of the data and of alternative interpretation which might make way for themselves. As Silverman (2006) states, the process of analysis that these themes undergo is in constant movement and is susceptible to change. Therefore, they can be exposed to a process of redefinition and reclassification as the whole investigation of the transcript data is underway and there are new experiences and views to be brought to light and explored. This type of data analysis seems appropriate for this study not only for its feature in providing with the communalities and trends within respondents' experiences and interpretations of certain situations or behaviours, but also for giving the researcher the ability to understand where the answer or the statement the respondent made has its source. Meaning, it gives the researcher the resources necessary to better understand where the respondents are coming from and the reasoning behind their response and what are the aspects of the situation or environment that is being researched that bothers them or has a certain effect on them.

The guide for the focus group and the discussions were done/held in Romanian. This was necessary considering the location and the national background of the youth. The data was transcribed in Romanian and the codes and themes were written directly in English in NVivo. After finalising the analysis, the results which are presented in the next section were translated by the researcher beforehand. The data and the results were presented and written through by respecting the three stages process presented above. Meaning that for the 'first order, second order themes and aggregate dimensions, an analytical framework was developed on participant's level of real world socializing and computer mediated communication' (El-Jarn, 2015: 114). The emergent themes which were identified in the data are further looked into the next and final research stage where the photographic content of the respondents is analysed and interpreted based on its content and on the statements the youth gave during the focus group discussions. To further highlight it, as mentioned in previous chapters, the analysis and the manner in which the results are presented are due to Braun and Clarke's (2013) guiding. Their work is the main source used to guide the analysis process. In Braun and Clarke (2006) they bring forward compelling arguments to the use of thematic analysis, as they see it to be something much more than a simple descriptive summary technique. They postulate that thematic analysis gives the research the necessary instruments to take the existing data and to develop a narrative which provides the reader with digestible information of the findings and of the main issues which are investigated.

The following section is presenting the results collected throughout the seven focus groups that were conducted. The results are shown according to the theme they fall under. Meaning that each of the themes that emerged are presented and then dissected in their sub- themes, which allows further exploration and understanding of the existing data. Following Braun & Clarke's advice, the concept of gender in this section of the research is seen and is described as being a feature that can be identified within the data rather than a potential theme that can be extracted from the existing transcribed text. This is done in order to capture a fuller perspective on the way gender impacts the respondents' daily lives, behaviours and identity performance in the digital space. Within this research gender is not seen as an element which is able to fully capture the essence of youth experience on its own as it lacks 'a central organising concept and simply clusters together a whole lot

of different ways gender is evident in the data' (Braun & Clarke, 2013:224).

All of the focus group discussions, regardless if they occurred face to face or online, began with a reaffirmation that all of the information they give is done anonymously, that they can choose to leave the study at any point in time, they can refuse to answer questions or participate in a certain topic of discussion if they choose to do so, they can retrieve their data from the study if they decide they do not wish any of their statements to be used in the current study and, if they have any additional questions or concerns, they could be addressed at any time. They were asked for permission for the researcher to be able to record the session and were informed that, if they did not feel comfortable, they could choose to close their camera. After all of the ethical aspects and concerns were addressed, and all of the respondents consented and ensured the researcher that they understood and are comfortable with all of the aspects mentioned above, a small ice break game took place in order to help the teenagers and the moderator get to know each other and make the atmosphere more relaxed and friendly. To provide the reader with an outline of how the sample for this stage of the research looks, the following table below (Table 12) is provided. The youth were asked again about their most used social media platform, the one where they are most active and engage the most with other users. This is important for the next stage of the research as it involves the analysis of the type of content they post and the themes which generate from it. The youth were also asked if they gave permission for this process and all of the sample answered yes. Although these aspects were presented in the consent form, as the youth are considered a vulnerable population, it seemed appropriate to double check that everyone is comfortable with the stages of the research and what it entails. Each of the respondents were given English names as pseudonyms.

Table 12 – Focus group participants' general information and social media platform

Respondent No	**Pseudonym**	**Sex**	**Age**	**The most used social media account**
1	Andrew	Male	16	Instagram
2	John	Male	15	Instagram
3	Kate	Female	18	Facebook

4	Lucy	Female	16	Instagram
5	Andy	Male	18	Facebook
6	Henry	Male	16	Instagram
7	James	Male	19	Instagram
8	Harry	Male	18	Facebook
9	Alice	Female	17	Instagram
10	Max	Male	19	Instagram
11	Kim	Female	18	Instagram
12	Jane	Female	18	Facebook
13	Anne	Female	16	Facebook
14	Alan	Male	15	Instagram
15	Jenny	Female	19	Instagram
16	Agnes	Female	19	Instagram
17	Abby	Female	19	Instagram
18	Will	Male	19	Instagram
19	Dean	Male	18	Instagram
20	Elizabeth	Female	17	Instagram
21	Linda	Female	17	Instagram
22	Mike	Male	15	Instagram
23	Gordon	Male	18	Instagram
24	Jennifer	Female	18	Instagram
25	Charles	Male	18	Instagram
26	Joseph	Male	18	Instagram
27	Mary	Female	19	Instagram
28	Karen	Female	18	Instagram
29	Joyce	Female	18	Instagram
30	Amy	Female	17	Instagram
31	Emma	Female	17	Instagram

The table above provides the information that is necessary in order to fully capture the data which was collected. In order to be able to distinguish who belongs to which group easily, the youth who were in the same discussion were colour coded together. The discussions presented a similar reaction and the answers showed a

data saturation by the fifth group, as they began to have a similar pattern and show similarities in the manner in which the representatives interpreted and saw the subject matter of this research project. Table 13 provides a visual representation of the emergent themes and the frequency in which they were mentioned. This also provides an outline of the order in which the results are presented and postulated. The themes and subthemes were coined and chosen by following the steps which Braun & Clarke (2013) have developed and presented in their very structured presentation of the necessary steps needed to be taken in order to grasp pertinent main themes which match and reflect the theoretical framework and the overall objective and research question of the study. As it is shown below, five main themes were identified in the whole body of transcribed data which reflect and capture the main subject of this research and which help form pertinent claims in regards to youths' gender identity and the impact it has on developing and performing said identity in a social media setting.

Table 13 – Thematic framework developed from the focus group transcribed data

Theme & Sub-Theme name	**How many times was it mentioned (across all focus group discussions)?**
Reproducing gender norms in social media contexts	7
- Constructing the self	7
- Gendered content	7
Gender impact on type and genre of content consumption	7
- Interests are not gendered	7
- Versatility of the internet	7
Online performances and experiences have offline impact	7
- Dark side of the web	7
Pandemic impact on online practices	7

3.2.1. Reproducing gender norms in social media contexts

The youth engage in an array of online activities and practices which are implemented in order to fulfil various social, educational and personal needs. As shown in previous chapters, identity creation and finding appropriate communities, in which they can perform the various versions of self is a key feature of this period of individual development. The collected data reflects these statements

and it makes it obvious that certain aspects of social life, as presented in the physical social environment, can be identified in the online space as well. They are essential elements which contributed in defining the social context in which teenagers and other users construct certain elements of the self, or simply play with it in these spaces. Because of this, the digital environment has begun to resemble more and more and to integrate rules and norms regarding contexts and settings that arise in day to day modern life. These aspects can be revealed and pinpointed in different stages of content creation and publication, as well as in the type of content one shares and the way they interact with others. Gender plays a focal role in these practices that contribute immensely to the rules of role play and the type of performance an individual must give, regardless if the stage they perform is online or offline. The term gender, as it is highly politicised and the context of the geographical setting being a more conservatory and religious one, was slightly avoided in the beginning phase of the focus group discussions. Rather than asking direct questions regarding the opinions that the youth have about gender norms and the way it impacts their gender identity, and therefore the manner in which they present themselves in the digital environment, and risking to make them feel uncomfortable and taken aback, a more subdued approach was adopted.

The focus group discussions began with the youths stating three words they can think of which describe the opposite sex and their own. Meaning, they were asked to write down three adjectives or any kind of descriptors which pop into their head when they think of the word girl and another three when they think of the word boy. All of the respondents engaged and participated in this task. The aim of it was to see how they view the binary gender groups and what are the characteristics they associate with them. The overall results that were provided were gender stereotypes, ones which fall in with the current ideology in regards to both sexes. This means that, from the beginning of the sessions, all of the respondents showed a clear integration and adoption of the predominant, mainstream gender norms. It also becomes clear that these norms have contributed to the manner in which they interpret their own realities and the manner in which they chose to present themselves in front stage settings. In order to describe girls, a string of soft words was given. By soft word it is meant that the wording used to describe females in general were mostly related to outer appearance or reflecting some passive personality trait. The words used not only reflect the fact that traditional gender norms are still

prevelant in the manner in which the youth see and interpret one another based on their sex, but also a continuous and imposing existence of traditional gender roles. The following extras are given to have a more reflective view on the above statements:

> "*Charismatic, delicate, cute*" (Andrew – age 16) "*Lovable, smart, beautiful*" (Alice – age 17) "*Beauty, sensitivity and wife*" (Max – age 19) "*Beauty, flowers, perfume*" (Emma – age 17)

The other answers fall into a similar category that have the same types of wording used to describe girls. The most often used word by the respondents, regardless of their gender, being beauty or beautiful and the rarest being strong or strength. Even, as we see above, words such as wife or mother were used by the respondents. These answers show that gender norms and roles still hold a functionalist value to them and they still influence the youth in their process of socialisation and later on performance of the gender they identify with, or simply they have accepted as being part of them due to their biology. These results are also reflective in the words used to describe boys. The choice of wording for the male sex were simply the exact opposite of the ones used to describe females. With this it is intended to convey that, while the respondents used soft words to describe girls, they also used strong or hard words to describe boys. By hard words it is meant that they reflect activity and are more related to personality traits rather than appearance, as it was done in the previous situation. The exact wording participants chose to describe boys were:

> "*Work, desire, superiority*" (Joseph – age 18) "*Intelligence, speed, competitive*" (Linda – age 17) "*Courageous, smart, careful*" (Agnes – age 19)
>
> "*Stubborn, sort of emotionally obtuse, protective*" (Harry – age 18)

As the excerpt from the participants conveys, boys are seen as a much more active and present type of individuals compared to the way they described girls which are seen in a much more passive and subdued light. These results again fall into the mainstream ideological discourse regarding the position of males and females in society, the way they are seen and the gender roles which are attributed to them. While the teenagers used words such as mother and wife to describe girls, no such equivalent was used to describe boys. This shows that different characteristics and aspects of social life are expected for boys than for girls. Another parallel was also noticed in the wording used as, while the most used words to

describe girls were related to outer appearance, the most prevalent words utilised to describe boys were related to physical strength and to intelligence. To further investigate the views teenagers have in regards to gender and the attributes they have assigned to male and females, additional questions were addressed to the group. They were first asked if girls cannot be strong to which Andrew (age 16) answered:

> "*It is not something which is emphasised, they are very strong, but it is not emphasised* "

At the same time, Andy (age 18) argued that there is no coincidence that women are considered the weaker sex and men are their opposite, while John (age 15) just answered a resounding no. In an equal fashion when asked if boys are beautiful Andrew answered (age 16):

> "*They can be, but it is not something which is emphasised.*"

The discussion that went on usually was in resounding agreement over these statements. The overall attitudes of the respondents, regardless of their age or sex, showed that the ideological elements to which they were exposed had a resounding effect on the way they saw each other and their own self. At least these elements are played out and exhibited in the context of the stage in which they perform their identities and it probably also depends on the audience they have. The gender norms and the stereotypical behaviours they present might be amplified, or reduced, depending on their setting and audience. When the discussion stirred away from the general view of how boys and girls see each other, and more towards the way they develop an identity in the online space and how those views on gender affected and influenced them, certain factors were identified. The main aspects which were brought forward when discussing social media, concerning the way they feel about the space and the way they gender norms transfer within the digital, were the fact that there is an enormous amount of pressure to maintain and to fulfil social beauty standards and anxiety when it comes to posting. The aspect regarding the need to have a very polished presence in social media settings seems to hold true within this sample as well. The results indicate that teenagers within the sample feel pressure in concerning the manner they present themselves on their social media platform of choice. In the case of this sample, the grand majority stated that they use Instagram the most when it comes to self expression and online presence, while only four of them have, or

prefer to mostly use, Facebook. The majority of the answers the youth gave about their feelings, experience and performance take place on one of these two platforms. Some interesting findings were collected about the way youth develop and think about their social media content in regards to the gender related pressure they feel, especially when it comes to their looks and overall feeling or message that they give their audiences. Concerning this aspect, Agnes (age 19) gave the following answer:

> "Right now, *I am less affected by it*, but at the beginning when I first discovered Instagram and Facebook *I was affected because I would see girls with more likes than me and that bothered me in real life that* ***I am less beautiful than that girl***, but with time I learned that that is not what actually defines me and it does not bother me as much and during that time *I was only 15-16 years old*, but now slowly I started realising that things are not really like that."

The important elements which reflect the influence and impact that gender norms have on the way teenagers process the messages and the performances set in the online space based on their gender identity have various implications and effects in the participants' view themselves. It also implies that the impression management process that occurs in the back stage takes into consideration the feedback, in this case sent in the form of likes and comments, they receive on certain performances, judge it through the gender lens and try to change certain aspects so they fit with the overall context and community values. What Agnes said about how the social environment impacted her views of herself and the other girls' performances based on the feedback they received is especially highlighted in regards to the age at which she said she was most affected by the gender norms and beauty standards. Another aspect that was mentioned to be important, especially for the girls, is the like (or the heart). The respondents stated that it is very important for a photo to receive likes, as it shows that they are appreciated and the photo is good. This shows that they are highly influenced by the reactions of the audience and they adjust their performance based on their feedback. Agnes's statement might imply that the younger the user is, the more difficult it would be for them to pick and choose which aspects serve them most, as the initial desire young people feel is that of fitting in with their peers and chosen community. The like, as it is shown in the extras does play an important role in the social media space, especially on platforms such as those mentioned. This aspect is explored more in the following themes.

Although they were not highlighted in the words they used to describe boys, the results collected show that beauty standards also have an impact on boys. The aspects which are valued are different (i.e., an overly muscular body is judged differently if the person is male or female), but they are still prevalent and can cause various psychological and social challenges for the youth as they strive to be active and perform them. Gender norms set different rules and standards for the sexes which are afterwards implemented, or at least taught to children from a very young age through socialisation and social conditioning. The youth polish these behaviours as they aim to explore the social universe outside of their families bounds. In regards to this, during one of the focus group discussions Henry (age 16) contributed to this subject by stating:

> "*I very much agree with James when it comes to these unrealisable beauty standards when it comes to both boys and girls...aaa...I think that girls are a lot more impacted by these things than we are...*"

On a similar tone Jenny (age 19) states that:

> "*...a lot of girls expose their bodies so they stand out for likes and to feel validated, and boys are the same, I mean they also expose themselves to a certain degree to be validated.*"

These results reflect that, although maybe not at the same intensity, at least from the perspective of the respondents, both sexes are exposed to the pressures of adapting to the standard and integrating these set gender norms in their everyday performances regardless if they take place in the online or the offline setting. These ideological factors are supported and enforced by the majority of social actors. These aspects are also supported by the existing sociological literature and empirical research which show that, especially for the age group which is sampled in this study, the way they are perceived by their peer group matters. This aspect is also supported by the collected results that show that the youth take in great consideration what type of content they post, and the creation process is not always an easy one. The results show that, especially the girls, feel anxious about posting and consult their friends or siblings before making a photo public. In relation to this statement Jane (age 18) gave the following answer: "*I ask the opinion of a lot of people before* (she posts), *because I don't trust myself anyway and I don't like the way I look in photos, I ask for people's opinion to see what they think about the photo*"

To this Alice (age 17) confirmed and continued to say:

> "*...until I posted the photos I had around 20 photos to choose from, I sent all 20 photos to around 10 people, which looks the best, which one should I post, which one should I not and this took a long time...*"

The process of posting is very extensive for the youth as they carefully curate and create their online selves taking into consideration the effects it might have on their audiences both in the online, as well as in the offline setting. This is due to the fact that it might create an imbalance in their overall reputation and performances. The same was echoed by Abby (age 19) when she stated that she has trouble posting because she has diverse groups of friends and does not want to upset them or better yet in her own words:

> "*I have had an irrational fear for a long time. I have friends who are very spread out and who are not connected. I have the impression that if I post a photo with one friend the others will see and they will think why is she not posting photos with me as well.*"

These statements present the fact that impression management within the digital space can often be an anxious and stress inducing process. It also pinpoints that, as the name of the theme indicates, gender norms and stereotypes have been uploaded in the digital environment and have a palpable impact on the manner in which teenagers construct their own digital content, taking into account all the ideological factors they learned throughout their upbringing in order to fit in. Although the answers above are mostly given by girls, as it is shown more detailed in the sub-themes presented below, it is indicated that boys are also impacted in the process of creating online content on their Instagram or Facebook accounts. This can be identified in Joseph's (age 18) statement concerning this fact, as he argues:

> "*I think it is clear, that everybody feels a social pressure regardless*" This theme has additional sub-themes attached to it. Both of them deepen and widen the point of view in which the aspect of the influence or impact of gender identity has on social media content development. They also show how teenagers construct themselves in the online setting and how they view other performances on these platforms.

Constructing the self

All of the respondents used photographs as the main medium in order to perform their identities in the online environment. The majority of photos were of the participants alone, and some were with friends, groups or family. These results are consistent with the ones identified in the first stage of the research. The respondents, especially girls, stated that they feel pressure when it comes to posting content and performing their identities on social media platforms. This aspect begs the question about the stages they go through, from the moment they decide to take the photo, to the point they deem it appropriate enough to be posted. This aspect was also explored in the previous research stage where it was addressed inside the online questionnaire through the question about editing. Interestingly this aspect was the most discussed and also criticised. Due to this, the sub-theme is fully focusing on two main aspects regarding editing and photo processing. These are related to the techniques the respondents apply and use to prepare their content for the audience and their views on how these practices are present on social media and the effect they have on the viewers. Editing practices applied by teenagers are seen by studies, such as the one done by Tiggemann et al. (2020), as being self-manipulation tools, which are highly related to body and facial dissatisfaction. This process is seen in this research as an essential tool in constructing, shaping and giving life to the self in the digital environment as it is deemed appropriate by the performer. These practices might be mandatory in the current social media landscape for the youth as they are encouraged to do so by the social pressures and norms that ask for a certain level of polish and scripted perfection. These aspects create the uneasiness that the youth mentioned and they also enforce the standards of what a good photo looks like even further. The discussion stirred towards the direction of the editing process and the subjects stirred towards social media and the types of activities they engage in this setting. Concerning editing their own photos and if they enjoy to modify them a certain way, Joyce (age 18) stated that: "*No, natural, like how the natural light is. I tinker a bit with the lighting, I darken them a bit and I give them...Instagram has structural editing, until 10% structural editing. It highlights a lot more the angles of the face...*"

To this Emma (age 17) replied:

> "*It depends, I either do it like Joyce and take a lot of photos until I find the perfect one, or I get from taking a photo or two and I like it a lot, and editing wise I also just do the lights so they are natural*"

The results show that there is some aversion towards modifying the human body and is not a subject that teenagers want to encourage. The majority of the youth were restrained about this subject or began their sentences with a no, but afterwards, as the extras show, they would argue that the modifications are mostly done to the lighting or contrast and not to them themselves. If modifications are done to their bodies, they argue that it should be a minimalistic approach. Body and facial dissatisfaction play a big role in the manner in which editing techniques are applied. A certain number of respondents stated that they do not edit their photos, others do it for them, which can be linked to the fact that the opinion of others is employed in the content creation process in order to ensure a high quality performance. To achieve this, different applications for the phone or even Photoshop are used. The most used technique used by both boys and girls in the process of content creation is that of taking multiple photos until the desired one is achieved. Regarding this, Alan (age 15) stated:

> "*Until now I was also thinking a lot about what to post, how to do it, I was thinking a lot if I look good or that...*"

This shows that posting content takes considerable amounts of work and reflection, regardless of the youth's age or gender. Their presentation of self is an aspect which they all look at before posting, or they might also choose to post very rarely or not at all. The social pressure to uphold the standard set by gender norms are felt even in other areas which in a way are outside of social media boundaries, but still connected to the digital and the way they are portrayed in photographic or video imagery. Regarding this aspect, during the discussions, Jennifer (age 18) recalled that as her class was taking photos for the end of the school year, half of the girls requested that their photos be edited. She went on arguing that in 20 years they are going to look at those photos and admire how good they looked when in reality their looks were modified to fit the standard. This shows that the youth are critical about the social practices that are being normalised, or at least encouraged in order to fit the mould, that they might take part in them but at the same time not be fully comfortable or encouraging of them. This is also seen in Mary's (age 19) statement which says:

> "*I also see the social pressure Jennifer mentioned. Because even when I call my best friend and although she accepts me as I am and I notice this in her too, we always tend to add filters to our face[...] not necessarily to change our physiognomy, but we add glitter, we make our skin look clearer and this is very unnatural [...] no filter can fix a bad photo...*"

The quote above indicates that the pressure to present oneself in a certain way might trickle down even in social context which, in a traditional social setting is among friends that might have employed a more relaxed context, and even in the backstage where the team-mates should converse in an informal and lax manner in order for a certain level of security and poise to be attained. This shows that rules concerning gender guide and frame the youth's performances while the social media environment offers them tools to enhance and perform for a wider audience. Another interesting aspect which was identified in this sub theme in relation to self construction in the digital environments is that, although teenagers go through these complex processes of self presentation, a certain level of authenticity, which captures the way they present themselves in physical settings, is seen as mandatory. As Jennifer (age 18) puts it:

> "*No, when you post, post things which are related to you and to your soul and your interests and you wish to inform others as well. I think we need to be as authentic as possible in the online space as well*"

This shows that a certain level of the self which is located in multiple settings needs to be present in the online space as well for it to be a reliable performance. These statements show that youth value their uniqueness and individuality while also trying to integrate and perform the socially accepted norms. This aspect is also reflected in the next sub-theme which is discussed as the respondents start focusing more on how they describe other teenagers' posts based on their gender rather than their own.

Gendered content

This sub-theme was identified during the discussion when they were asked to describe the type of content boys and girls post. Key differences were noticed in the attitudes and the words they used for each of the sexes. Hence, the sub-theme name was chosen due to the fact that the content was given certain qualities based on the gender of the performer. Similarly with the exercise presented in the main theme, the youth were asked about the way they describe content made by girls and the content made by boys. They were asked to give three words that pop into their head when they think about it. The initial reaction, form some respondents to this request was quite reactive and indicated that there might be some underlying frustrations regarding this subject, as Kate (age 18) had this to say:

> "*Oh God! The things I want to say about girls.*"

This attitude could indicate some underlying internalised misogyny which could be encouraged by some peer groups, or at least accepted in certain degrees. This was also highlighted by the other respondents which argue that some girls use too many filters or other types of physical altering techniques. Still, this does not reflect the overall views of the respondents regarding the type of content girls make. Some extras that reflect the majority regarding female content are:

> "[…] *the content made by girls I wrote that it is funny, cute and sensitive because a lot of girls post those quotes that reach your soul*" (Harry, age 18)

> "[…] *posts made by girls seem to me to be pretty creative, generally about fashion, make-up and all that is beautiful*" (Karen, age 18)

> "*Complex, concrete information and explicit information*" (Mike, age 15)

A few aspects kept repeating themselves which is that the type of content girls post usually has some meaning, a message sent created specifically for someone, that it is very complex and aesthetically pleasing. Some respondents, as Mike and Kate did, postulated that the type of content girls post can be at times vulgar and explicit or overly edited, which does not match the real person or their real life. These aspects can thus be argued to be prevalent on social media, and at times encouraged by influencers or other influential figures in their communities or peer groups, and are not aspects which are created in isolated cases. These quotes show the way youth view the content created by girls but it could also indicate the lengths girls go through and the dedication they give to develop their content. The way content created by boys is seen at times, is presented almost as a parallel to the type of content girls make. The participants stated the following things regarding the type of content boys make:

> "*Content made by boys, me as a girl find it shows a lot of creativity, but there are also examples of excessive exposure display and I think it is in opposition with the content posted by girls*" (Jennifer, age 18)

> "*For content made by boys I wrote embarrassing, funny, cute because there are a lot of guys that show off on Facebook with cars*" (James, age 19)

> "*Indifferent, funny and distracted*" (Kate, age 18)

These extras show that while the content created by girls is often seen as something more detail oriented, complex and carefully curated, the content posted by boys is seen as being in general more relaxed, comedy based and informative. Scientific was another descriptor that was often used. Communalities have also been noticed as both girls and boys have been described as posting content about fashion or things that matter, be it about social or political issues. As it was highlighted in the quote from James, it is shown that certain behaviours and displays of gender identity can backfire and receive the audience's criticism. Boys' content was also described as vulgar if they showed an over-objectification of their bodies (posted something without their shirt on or on the hood of a car). These criticisms about gender display were received by both the content posted by girls and by the content posted by boys. Still, it can be argued that gender norms have an impact on the youth and the way they present themselves regardless of their gender and is a highly important aspect which at times can induce anxiety or stress. The following theme takes a different approach to the way gender stereotype frameworks have made their way on social media platforms and how representation of these aspects impact the way the youth think of themselves and of the content made by influencers, based on their sex and outer appearance.

3.2.2. Gender impact on type and genre of content consumption

This main theme was identified when the teens were set to watch small portions of the YouTube clips mentioned in the *Methodological consideration* chapter, and when the feedback they have given in relation to the differences they encounter in the two and their interpretation or description of them was taken into consideration. The way certain media or social media content might be interpreted has a considerable amount of unspoken meaning related to the person who delivers the information or performs the role. This, as presented in the *Literature review* chapter can be noticed to hold relevance especially in old forms of media where gender was depicted in very specific manners and any sort of deviation from the norm was still analysed and interpreted in those terms. Gender norms, as it was pointed out in the previous theme, have managed to transfer themselves in the digital space and hold the same dominance over the individual as in the physical environment. Unsurprisingly, although it did provide more opportunity for content exploration, these aspects have also

impacted influencers regardless of their area of expertise. With this in mind, the results collected, which led to the identification of this theme, showed that youth have been impacted by gendered messages in various perspectives of their lives. After watching the two clips which have the same subject matter, the youth were asked what differences they noticed between them and, as a result, some of the obvious answers were related to the fact that in one the presenter was a woman, while in the other a man. They also pointed out elements regarding the overall production of the video (lighting, editing cuts, photos and background music), and they also began observing and stating elements more related to the presenters. Some of the extras regarding are:

> "*I think we all noticed that there are differences in the way a man and woman presents. The woman tends to give more details, while men tend to be concise and straight to the point*" (Linda, age 17).

> "*I consider that the man presented the theme much more credible and much more formal than the woman*" (Amy, age 17)

> "*Both videos have the same intention, but truly the video made by the mister seems a bit more professional, his arguments are better structured, audio quality is better, it's more well structured in general*" (Henry, age 16)

As the results indicate, although the videos presented information about the moon landing and some scientific elements about space, there was a strong preference for the male presenter. The female presenter is seen from the get go as less skilled or less trustworthy in what she has to say. Not that the information she is stating is considered erroneous, but rather that she does not seem as professional as the male. Out of all the respondents, one recognised her and stated that she's been working at a scientific production company for years and producing these types of videos. To use Harry's own words "I doubt she's an amateur". In reality the female presenter, whose real name is Amy Shira Teitel, is a spacecraft historian who has worked with Discovery and has a MA in Science and Technology Studies, while Simon Whistler (the male presenter) has a degree in law. Knowing this background information also highlights that although the female presenter has actual training for the subject, she is still seen as less professional than the male presenter. To take this a bit further a scenario was presented to the participants in which they were told they have to

do a project about the moon landing and were asked which of the two videos would they trust as a source, to which a considerable portion of the sample answered in a similar way with Alan (age 15):

> "*I would choose to watch both, but if I have to choose only one, I think it would be the boy*"

These results could indicate that certain stereotypical and conservative views regarding women's gender roles and their type of content, that is usually associated from a traditional point of view, might have transferred into the digital environment. The fact that teenagers grew up with gender norms which have a more functionalist perspective impacts the way they read and understand media based on the social characteristics that others are portraying. This theme adds to the previous one from a different perspective, meaning that they both give the ability to see the various areas in which gender has integrated itself and how it impacts both the consumption of a performance, as well as the manner in which the respondents coin and present their own. It can be summarised that, although we are dealing with a relatively new medium, or at least a constantly evolving one, the old views that are portrayed in social practices still exist and they have been uploaded to the online realm. The sub-themes associated with this main theme are related to other behaviours and opinions the youth have when it comes to the internet and content consumption. This is done with the goal to identify any gender differences and identity formation practices.

Interests are not gendered

The name for this sub-theme came from one of the quotes given by Mary (age 19) when discussing what type of content teenagers usually consume while they are online in order to see if there are any key differences between boys and girls. In regards to the content consumption practices Mary stated that:

> "*There are interest groups and I believe that the themes which are approached are very similar in the way in which both boys and girls tackle the same theme. It depends on each of their personalities, or on the interest which they have.*"

Mary was talking about how she does not like to generalise, underlining that there are girls who talk and are passionate about subjects, such as sports, and make content about it, and there are boys who are passionate about make-up and create various types of content about this theme. She was referring to the fact that people can engage with subjects which traditionally are not associated with

them due to their biological sex, and that they make interesting things either way. This discussion inspired the name of this theme and, as Mary put it, interests do not have gender. With that said, certain communalities and also certain differences in the type of content teenagers consume have been identified. This attitude resonated among other participants as well, who argued that they were already living during a time when the attitude and views are changing when it comes to gender. All of the participants stated that they use the internet and social media groups or pages for educational purposes, specifically for information and communication that has to do with a hobby, passion or for school purposes. Another category that was found in both sexes is that of comedy, or more precise, stand-up comedy, memes, cats and dogs. Entertainment and education seem to be some of the more central types of content for both boys and girls. Even fashion has been mentioned by both, although it seems to be more common with girls. Make-up and lifestyle content was also something that a big portion of the female sample mentioned they consume while they surf the web or are on social media. Movies, TV series, music, podcasts, online games, ted talks, art, poetry, IT and sport are all types of interests that the youth share and engage with. These results also match quite well with the ones related to interests presented in the previous section.

To uncover more about these habits of online content consumption the participants were asked if they follow any hashtags. These elements are usually used on Instagram to filter and follow certain discussion threads (i.e., #travel or #art) and it can be a productive approach in understanding more about youth online practices. The majority answered that they do not follow any and they just consume the content that is on their feed, but a few participants said that they do, and the interesting aspect which arose is that their hashtags involved socio and political issues which were popular at the time of the session, things which are in trend or related to their interest. About this subject Karen (age 18) stated that:

> "*At one point there was that MeToo movement. I liked it a lot to hear not that I am some great feminist, but I liked the movement a lot. To see women who inspire and motivate other women to take action, to rise up and say what they have to say* [.]"

On a similar note, Harry (age 18) stated that:

> "*I don't have any, but at one point I followed the guy from America with George Floyd*"

The results indicate that youth have a wide array of interests which transcend that of traditional gendered limitation in most of the cases and situations. They also present a possible interest in current global issues and trends and hashtags are a way to get connected to these events in a fast and efficient manner. To investigate this aspect of content consumption in the online realm that could lead to any possible exciting findings, the youth were asked about the type of influencers they follow, or even if they follow any at all. The results also reflected the initial results regarding interest in the sense that it matters less who the influencer is and more what type of themes and subjects they regularly engage with. Karen (age 18) stated regarding this aspect that:

> "*In the past I used to follow a lot of vloggers who gave advice about lifestyle, make-up. Now I realise that I am attracted a lot to this part about life advice, experiences, stories, a career guide, movements which help the community*"

Influencers are seen by the youth as a tricky subject due to the fact that the content might have an undesired impact. The way Agnes (age 19) choses them is by seeing if their behaviour and values align with hers, or to put it in her own words: "[...] *you need to be careful and pay attention to what you choose, for example I chose Ioana Grama because I like her life principles and the way she treats people*[...]"

Regardless if it is hashtags or influencers, the focus seems to not be so much on the person themselves, or the overall personality they are performing, but on the subject matter which interests them. Although when choosing an influencer, the youth choose someone who aligns with their own life principles and that, like in Karen's case, can change with time.

Versatility of the internet

To build more on the data collected in the previous stage they were asked what does the internet mean to them. The question launched a wave of dynamic discussion about the opportunities and the risks of the digital medium and the way it impacted society on a global scale. The internet is a dynamic and constantly changing space that has managed to integrate itself in every part of everyday life and the youth see and recognize this aspect. As Joseph (age 18) puts it:

> "*Taking in consideration that everything that happens today is supported by the internet, I wouldn't say it is mostly everything, but it represents an important component of our present*"

The youth have multiple uses for the digital space, which in part is related to their interest. A source of information that is easily accessible was a characteristic used quite often by the respondents. Entertainment was also one that was used by many respondents and it pans out as many have stated that one of the types of content, they consume is related to various forms of entertainment such as stand-up comedy, memes and funny animal videos. The respondents are aware of the duality of the digital space and contemplate on any particular consequences it might unleash in their day to day physical life. As Jennifer (age 18) puts it:

> "*I tried to quit and I can't. It became an addiction for the most of us and sadly it has a positive side and a negative side*"

At this point in the sessions the participants, regardless of the group they were part of, became quite relaxed and open to the discussion, making the whole experience dynamic and engaging. To what Jennifer said above, Mary (age 19) responded with the following:

> *"I don't see the internet the same way Jennifer sees it, that grim. For me the internet is a way to be connected with any type of information from any corner of the world. It's the only way to see my parents, sister, daily and all that is related to my home. It's a way to educate. I learned a lot of notions from the internet, maybe tolerance, a lot of things which me as a girl from a village could not have access them without the internet [...] Of course there are side effects too, like Jennifer mentioned, but I think that especially in our current time, in which we have the Coronavirus, the internet is a salvation for people*"

To give context to what Mary is saying, within the city of Suceava a great number of children, from the surrounding villages or from wherever in the county, come to the city for their high school education and live in the dorms provided by the school or in rent housing. This aspect of a *girl from the village* is something which the research from the UN's Committee for children's rights has also highlighted, in the idea that the internet provides information and it is children and young people's right to be able to have access to it. They highlighted the fact that removing access to the internet is not a viable preventive option in regard to minimising the potential risks, as all it does is widening the inequality gap between children and youth (OHCHR, 2021). The extracts from Mary have many important points related to the importance of the internet in youth's life and the manner in which it changed it, by providing them with a wide range of opportunities, from education

to establishing an actual career in the online space. The various meanings the internet represents for the youth were at times intertwined with the meanings social media holds. When they were asked to distinguish a bit more clearly between the two, the answers provided could be set in two categories: social media is communication and the internet is information. Social media platforms, according to the way the youth use them can be seen as platforms for entertainment and platforms for communication. Platforms for communication are Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat, while platforms for entertainment are YouTube, TikTok, Twitch and Netflix. Although Netflix is a streaming platform and not a social media one, it is appropriate to set it here as it is an online getaway where teens are entertained by the movies or TV series they consume. Regarding this Agnes (age 19) said:

> "[…]*I watch clips about history, clips about serious subjects and I watch movies to relax, Netflix, I listen to music, meaning everything that I can do to relax and for my wellbeing*[…]" Andy (age 18) also had a perspective on what social media is which captures the overall perspectives which the others have mentioned:
>
> "*It's a method of communication and entertainment. You're bored, you open up Facebook or YouTube and you occupy your time*"

The respondents also commented on social media's unique ability to allow individuals to create their versions of self in the online environment and to curate that image to their liking. This process is at times seen as something that lacks complete honesty, or as Jenny (age 19) puts it:

> "*It's a way to trick the eye because everybody is presenting themselves exactly like they are not*"

The internet and social media platforms are key elements in the daily social practices the youth engages in. The level of interconnection and double spatial existence of youths in both the online and offline environment is something they also recognise, as it can become challenging if they overuse. The results reflect the overall data regarding this subject from the wider body of literature, but it also matches this research's own findings from the previous stage, which also indicated that adolescents use social media mostly as a communication tool and for entertainment purposes. These aspects concerning the impact social media has on youths' offline identities are further explored in the next main theme.

3.2.3. Online performances and experiences have offline impact

The previously presented results have shown that online activities can cause real offline feelings and have an impact on the way adolescents go about their impression management tactics. Posting or creating content can be an anxiety or stress inducing activity for some users, as they are exposed to their audience and their real life criticism. At times, their online audiences can be their offline ones as well, which can lead to having their online performances criticised or discussed in offline settings. The previous section showed that, for the majority of users, the people who are their friends or their followers in the online space are people they actually know from their physical day to day. These people can be their friends, classmates or even parents. Others' depiction of self has been shown to also have an impact on users' self- esteem and the manner in which they view themselves. Meaning that, even from the position of a member of the audience, the youth can still be impacted by the content presented on social media. This activity makes the individual reanalyse their own performances and social circumstances within their time backstage. Emma (age 17) states the following regarding the impact that the online has on the offline self:

> "*I personally, lately, especially this year I decided to quit social media and to deactivate all my accounts, because it is very toxic what you see there. Because it seems that everybody has a perfect life or a perfect body and you want it too and it makes it worse for you mentally. But I try to follow only people who inspire me in a positive way and who know that they open up and tell even the part of their lives which is less pink*"

This argument was supported by the other participants of this focus group as well, and that they have changed drastically the type of people they follow and look for people who are not afraid to show the imperfect sides of life. This indicates that even in online settings the youth look for influencers or befriend people whom they can relate to and can present their own identities in the same light. This type of responses were given by multiple people, as it was indicated above, who have experienced an interwoven connection between the online and offline in various ways. There have been participants who have answered that they do not feel the online has an impact on their offline selves and that they keep the two realms separate. To further explore this aspect the youth were asked about what

kind of experiences they have on social media. Their answers are analysed and presented in the sub-theme below.

Dark side of the web

According to the existing sociological literature and body of research, the youth have complex experiences within the digital realm, where real life social interaction takes place through real time texts, and can lead to creating feelings of belonging to a community and friendship. Unlike the physical realm, within the digital users can be easily reached and connected by a plethora of individuals who have various intentions. The overall existing research is recognising the potential risks which the youth could be experiencing within the online space and which can have extensive consequences on their reputation, social and mental wellbeing. Some of the risks mentioned by the sample, which they personally experienced, are identity theft, cyberbullying and sexual harassment. Although the question did not hint towards a certain direction (even if clarifications were made and the teens were told that they can tell whatever experience they are comfortable with) the youth tended to tell experiences which they encountered, or saw other people close to them experience, rather than other types that lacked a direct connection with them. Concerning the identity theft situation Andrew (age 16) stated:

> "*Three/Four months ago my Facebook account got hacked [...] he called only girls, it was a man, he called only girls, video called them and made some ugly gestures. One of the girls I can't say she was traumatised, but let's say it was ugly*"

Andrew stated that he took all of the necessary steps to secure his account, but concluded that the whole incident made him feel nervous because that individual could have done a lot of things using his account. This shows that the youth can be heavily emotionally impacted by social media experiences and that they can impact that person's image and their performances among their peers and communities. Unlike these types of risks in the physical realm, the ones that occur in the online space can follow the individual constantly and, as a result, he can intensely feel the pressure of the whole event. Another event related to risk in the online realm is given by James (age 19) who stated:

> " [...] *I was approached by some weird guys on Facebook and...I can say that I think that a girl would have not been at all ok with this thing...especially that girls unfortunately are approached a lot more often*"

To continue on James' prediction, a considerable number of the female participants talked about them, or girls they know, that have had similar situations as he did. This shows that youth can encounter or have experiences in which they could feel highly uncomfortable or even unsafe in their own home. James' quote was shown in order to highlight that male youth also encounter non requested and non-consensual situations of this kind, and this can also impact their wellbeing and sense of self. Another risk that was brought forward during discussions is that of cyberbullying. Concerning this Max (age 19) stated:

> "[…] *you can easily encounter bullying on social media, it also happened to me when I was younger. Fortunately, in my case it was not that serious, but for other kids the harassment unfortunately reaches a pretty high level*" The results collected during this stage indicate that children and young people, when performing their online identities or participating in online activities, face the possibility of encountering risks that have an impact on various areas of their offline lives. This also could indicate that the way they construct their online identities is also designed to take certain precautions in order to minimise these potential situations.

3.2.4. Pandemic impact on online practices

The SARS-CoV2 pandemic had impacted youths' lives on all accounts. Their entire lives had transitioned from everyday social face-to-face interaction to being fully online and restricted in social interaction. This was one of the aspects mentioned by the respondents, highlighting that everything they did at the time when the data was collected was online, even the focus group sessions. The discussion regarding the virus was initiated to see if there had been any changes in their posting habits due to all of them being under lockdown, or if they noticed any changes in their online behaviour. The majority answered that they did not have any changes in the way or how often they post, but now they spend most of their time being online as every aspect of their lives has transitioned there. The manner in which they looked at the pandemic experience was not in the sense of a global event that disrupted the normal flow of their lives. As Charles (age 18) stated:

> "*The pandemic has offered us more time for us to do what we like and to discover more of ourselves. I don't look at the pandemic as a bad thing. I didn't look at it as a bad thing, even though it did a lot of damage in a lot of areas. Overall, I think it was also a good thing. An experience.*"

During this time, teenagers significantly increased their time spent within the online space, as their entire communities moved from the physical into the digital. Communication, streaming (TV series, movies) and content consumption are some of the practices participants mentioned that had increased during that time. Similar to Charles, other participants also mentioned that they're using the extra time to work on themselves and to explore more of their hobbies and ambitions. This could indicate that although not entirely unaffected, the youth made the best out of the situation and used the digital space to engage with others and perform their sense of self in various manners.

All of the focus group sessions ended with the youth talking about the research and stated their thoughts about the main subject that is being investigated. All of the respondents indicated interest and expressed that there is a necessity for more discussions regarding it. Regarding the main subject of the research Gordon (age 18) stated the following:

> "*The subject seems too serious, it cannot be taken lightly and it is good that we could talk about it.*"

This sentiment was resounding throughout the sessions and some respondents expressed gratitude that they were given the opportunity to talk about social media and the way it impacts their lives. During the discussions, the role of schools was brought forward as an institution in their lives which has an impact towards their social media activities, but at times does not offer support in case risk is encountered. Concerning this aspect Jennifer (age 18) recalled:

> "*For the majority, let's admit it, even the teachers, in this period with the pandemic, learned how to use the internet. Before, if you said something at school, that this happened, the teachers were like 'so what? Tell your parents*"

Jennifer recalled a situation that one of her colleagues encountered in middle school in which she faced harassment by one of her male classmates on social media, and although it happened with someone from school, according to Jennifer, teachers brushed it off as not important. Jennifer also implied that the teachers do not have, or at least had, the necessary knowledge or awareness of how the internet works and how dire the consequences of certain experiences could be on the individual and their identity development. This raised the question if the participants believed the school should get involved by holding discussions about social

media and its implications. To this, the majority said yes, recognizing that talking about it in an organised manner could help, especially during middle school or during the age when teenagers begin creating their online selves for the first time, in order to inform about the risks and to help create an online image without exposing too much personal information. This shows that there is exponential room for these findings to be presented in a different format to guide certain groups of people who are working closely with teens.

As it was mentioned in the results section, the findings presented have been identified by the larger body of studies and also within academic literature. The empirical findings overall pinpoint that there might be a strong indication that the gender identity the youth form in their offline selves transfers into the online and heavily influences the way they form and develop their online selves and the way they choose to perform said identities. There is a constant growing body of research concerning the way users form their impressions or their views of others' performances or depictions of self within the digitally mediated settings. In regards to the words that were used to describe girls and boys, which are presented in the first theme, similar findings were presented in a 2017 study conducted by Bacev-Giles & Haji which found that their participants had a tendency to associate gender stereotypical impressions based on the sex of the performer. The participants related similar wording as the ones provided by the respondents in this research, such as athletic for males and friendly for females (Bacev-Giles & Haji, 2017). Their research also indicated that the participants engaged in showing a gender normative description of the social media profiles they were looking at, and using words which indicated activity to describe males while using words that indicated passivity or softness to describe females. In the research conducted by Bamman et al. (2014) they identified that gender normative behaviour is identified even in the manner in which performers presented themselves linguistically on their social media profiles. They stated that 'gender is correlated both with linguistic resources as well as with social network composition' (Bamman, 2014:149). This type of gendered viewing of social media was visible in this research in both the way the content produced by others was described, as well as in the process one presented as the construction of the different versions of self. The content made by girls was seen by the participants as being highly curated, detailed and edited while the one posted by boys was described more as being relaxed, funny or even scientific. This indicates that even in

social media, or simply computer mediated settings, one is doing gender. By doing gender, or exhibiting features related to gender, leads to the user's performance being judged or labelled by the audience members based on their social context (West & Zimmerman, 1987). This aspect is available in reverse where the performer integrates the social contexts and norms which are associated with their families, peer groups or communities within their content, in order to fit in or gain the approval of those who they know in the offline environment.

Tiggemann et al., (2020) has undergone a study regarding self presentation within social media context and identified results reflecting the ones of this current research when it comes to the process of photographic content creation. Their study had a sample of 130 young women and they identified that while they were engaging in social media settings the users showed an inclination towards an intense attention to the manner in which they produced the visual content related to self-presentation. Meaning that it generates 'maladaptive desire to appear perfect to others, including the concealment of perceived imperfections (Hewitt et al., 2003)' therefore posting a photo of themselves 'on social media gives users a unique opportunity to promote a perfect version of themselves' (Tiggemann, 2020:180). The social actor, as defined by Goffman, is a being with a repository of versions or faces which are activated depending on whom their audience is and, due to this, engaging in region behaviour or segregating their audiences becomes an essential practice in front stage performances (Tseëlon, 1992). Concerning performances in social media settings Wiederhold (2018) argues that the online environment presents an intense lack of control which could lead to a series of consequences at a both personal or professional level (educational level would be more appropriate in the case of the research sample). Therefore, it can be said that 'even if a person takes every effort to control what people may see, the echoes of an online identity can allow curious viewers to peek behind the curtain of our private selves' (Wiederhold, 2018:591). This supports the fact that by having a lack of control on the context and reactions from their audience the youth, especially girls who feel pressured to present themselves a certain way, will feel anxiety or stress over the process of taking, editing and posting a photo (Jordan et al., 2014). Photos are seen and considered by social theorists to be activities towards which individuals participate in an active manner as it has become a process of participation in mainstream culture (Cover, 2016).

This practice has been shown by studies, such as the one made by Chua (2016), that the youth and especially girls try to meet norms or standards when it comes to physical appearance. In order to achieve this, they edit their content so they can make one look up to par. The results of this stage in the research showed that both boys and girls stated that it mattered to them the way they were presented online, meaning that they wanted to transmit to the audience that they are decent and well groomed. Similarly, to the existing body of research (Endendijk et al., 2019; Davis & Weinstein, 2017; boyd, 2014; Livingstone, 2008) both boys and girls cared how they came across and asked for the feedback of those around them in order to subsequently adjust their content before presenting it to the audience. Gender stereotypes were also encountered in the way the teenagers described the two YouTube video clips, as the one with the male host was overall seen as more professional than the one made by the female host. In her 2019 article, Roper argued that students hold a gender bias when it comes to education and professionals. She argued that faculty members and scientists are often exposed to gender bias and are regularly underestimated in their abilities and performances. Similarly, Schroeder (2021) postulated in their research that within social media influencer culture, which is heavily based on contemporary consumer culture, gender becomes an element which is at time processed and recirculated. They argue that, while researchers and the overall developed consumer market has become more open to diverse gender identity performances and displays, the current market place is continuously inscribing traditional and stereotypical versions of gender.

Adolescents are a category of the population which are known for the importance of developing social relations, as they are a part which contributes to the youths' social and mental wellbeing. There is an equal essential element to youths' general view of self in situations in which social relations represent a risk, as the situations in which one feels unsafe 'have negative repercussions on the lives of young people who have been involved in them' (Barragán Martín et al., 2021:1). Livingstone and Pothong's (2022) article highlight that activities associated with ICTs have been identified to have a complex range of content, contract, conduct and contract risks which can have a direct impact on the development of children and youth regarding the self and wellbeing in general. The two argue that 'the popular assertion of an offline/online boundary and its mapping onto real/virtual or good/bad' need to be questioned (Livingstone & Pothong, 2022:486). Concerning this aspect, Third &

Moody (2021) also argue that the experiences and voices of children and youth need to be listened to and taken in consideration, as the manner in which play, identity formation and other traditional non digital practices have transferred into the digital and now co-exist in the two environments. Taking the youth experiences and regarding them in a serious manner is considered by the wider body of studies a paramount element for both their overall wellbeing as well as their development.

These aspects are also postulated by Grimes (2021) as they state that lives of children and the youth are undergoing a process in which they are becoming reliant on the digital space, as the technologies had become ubiquitous through portable smart devices, AI driven transformation of both the public and the private sectors, big data and other types of digitally smart spaces. Because of these innovations and modifications in the manners in which youth live their lives, their subcultures had received dynamic and interconnected spaces in which they had developed creatively and socially (Kucirkova, 2021). There is a growing body of data which is encouraging that steps should be taken in order to develop 'child-centred interventions in education, urban planning, family policy [...] to enhance opportunities for children's identity, participation and fullest development' (Livingstone & Pothong, 2022:486). There is strong support from both organisations and academics regarding the need for youth to be allowed to have their own agency and to take control over the way they choose to present themselves. There is still a need to recognise that children and youth have several social aspects to consider and are not, as the results indicated, fully free in the manner in which they choose to create, edit and post photographic content, and have several elements to consider before they make it public. Cyberbullying is also a worry, or even a risk, many teens, including those from the current sample, had encountered. Sexual harassment is another risk that possesses certain worries for the youth. Beltrán-Catalán et al. (2018) stated that when it comes to online risks, such as cyber bullying, the victims had been recorded to have been more severely affected than victims of traditional bullying. Similarly, other forms of risk have similar effects as they happen on a much more public scale, due to the globality of the internet. Identity performance, as results indicated, becomes a curated practice as a form of protection and also belonging to the group (Davis & Weinstein, 2017). These aspects had also been studied during the pandemic as most of the youth interactions, as results showed, had become mediated.

The SARS-CoV-2 virus had an overwhelming impact on the entire global society and it pushed the digital environment even more in the forefront of current modern society, as people stopped doing their daily physical activities and had completely transferred all aspects of their lives into the digital environment as lockdown ensued. An intense digitalisation process started to adjust to the needs of society in a time of crisis, and the need for self expression and identity performance began to mostly occur on social media platforms, like Instagram or Facebook, which 'have also become helpful for the lay public to maintain communication with friends and family, to reduce isolation and boredom which have been associated with anxiety and long-term distress, therefore becoming an important recommendation for isolation at home to help to reduce the psychological impact' (Gonzalez-Padilla et al, 2020:120). The majority of youth within this study stated that they did not notice any changes in their content creation habits, but had noticed an increase in content consumption. An increase in online presence and in sharing information among themselves has been reported, as regulations began to be implemented and certain rules needed to be respected in order to attempt to flatten the curve. Hamilton et al. (2020) identified similar results in their own study regarding adolescents' social media use and practices during COVID-19. They postulated that 'disruptions of COVID-19 may contribute to longer bouts of social media use during the day and night, disrupting sleep and the body's natural rhythms' (Hamilton et al., 2020:16). They also argued that, during this time, teenagers with lower self-esteem might engage in more risk taking behaviour regarding their online identity performances. The results concerning the usage of social media platforms during the pandemic showed that respondents mostly engaged in mediated practices. This aspect was highlighted by research such as Martin et al. (2018) who highlighted the fact that the youth stay connected and communicate through these digital channels in a non-conforming manner, as they are not gate kept by institutional restraints. These results were published before the pandemic started, but the current research results indicated that these mediated practices had only increased as they have been reduced physically. Research also indicated an abrupt drop in overall mental and social wellbeing as all of these interactions had moved in the online space and online risks had become more prevalent (Foa et al., 2020; Gerrard, 2020).

The results presented in the current research stage have found themselves within the wider body of data and are supported by the first stage as well. The results from the first stage of the research

have maintained their consistency, as the same results were also collected within this stage, regarding aspects such as the most frequented social media platform (Instagram), the most used format of content (photos), the motivation for using social media platforms, especially during COVID-19, (to communicate with others) and so on. These results show that there are some key differences in the way boys and girls go about their identity performances in digital settings and the meanings they associate with them. At the same time, gender norms and peer influence has been identified as being a key factor that leads the manner in which photographic content is created, edited and posted. The next and final research stage takes a step forward in understanding these aspects. It aims to provide a thematic framework identified in the posts made by the sample on their Instagram (Facebook in the case of the four participants) profiles. This aims to grasp a clearer view on how teenagers' gender identities impact the way they portray and perform their sense of self in digital contexts.

3.3. Photographic analysis

The development and implementation of social media platforms has brought forward paramount changes in the global social structure. This extended from the manner in which relationships and communication have become extensively mediated to the manner in which individuals interact with institutions, government figures and professional prospects and responsibilities. As it was extensively presented in the previous chapters, ICT's and digital media had impacted and revolutionised every aspect of social life, including the way in which individuals present themselves. The results from the previous two chapters indicate that these aspects have especially influenced the manner in which youth associate with their own sense of self and with those from their community, family and peer group. In both the online questionnaire and the focus group sessions, the youth that were sampled for this study stated that they use social media platforms mostly to communicate with their friends, family, classmates and other people who they engage with in the physical environment, and the most user generated content they create are photographs (Herring et al., 2015). Due to these enormous technological developments and the manner in which digital technology infiltrated social norms and the manner in which photographs have been utilised, compared to previous generations, has changed dramatically (Eberle, 2018). With previous generations, photography was either a profession or a

hobby adopted only by certain groups of people who most likely belonged to a certain higher standing socio-economic class.

The development on ICTs, or more precisely that of the smartphone, launched a new meaning to this practice as individuals had easy access to the technology, including to the editing apps, therefore making this practice become something which is considered by theorists to be a 'pervasive activity around the globe' (Eberle, 2018:392). According to Lister (2018), in current times, over 95 million user generated photos are uploaded daily on Instagram and research indicates that this is still an upward trend. This pervasiveness of photography has also provided plenty of debate within visual sociology studies as these mediums, especially in the context of identity performance, can be used as data in order to pinpoint certain occurring categories or themes. The use in research of photographs has become an encouraged tool, especially in the case in which they are used in order to enrich and substantiate other existing findings, as is the case with the current research project (Banks, 2018). Becoming an omnipresent aspect of the current social environment, photographs have become a social activity in itself, as they are disseminated through social media platforms in order to fulfil a social interaction through the actor and their audience.

This aspect was identified even from the incipient phases of the social media platforms when researchers such as Ito (2005) identified that visual elements are used as a form of active co-presence. They go on to describe that the developing use of images and photos in sharing online context leads to the creation of 'intimate visual co-presence—that is keyed to the personal, pervasive, and intimate nature of social connections via handheld devices' (Ito, 2005:1). The infiltration of these social networks and the impact it has on the way social interaction and communication takes place, has led to a refocus within communication, media studies, sociology, economy and psychological studies and academic work. The collection of empirical data has also refocused on the manner in which photographs are used in order to better understand certain practices and performances of identity, especially in regards to gender.

Research on the impact of visual media on online gender identity formation of children and the youth, as it can be seen in Livingstone's articles, has already become an intensely studied topic by 2008. An aspect that was highlighted in her research is that, although the internet presents the opportunity for global interactions between users, the majority of users individually connected on social media platforms are people that know each

other from their offline environments. This aspect was also highlighted in this research, as the participants attested that the majority of their online friends or followers are their physical space acquaintances, friends, relatives and so on. The previous chapter presents a deeper dive related to the theoretical aspects and the existing research regarding the manner in which the youth use the online environment as an extension of the self, but it is worth mentioning that the way photographs are used by the youth is highly more mediated then with previous generations. In the previous chapter, as mentioned by the respondents, it was underlined that, especially with content posted by girls, there is always more meaning associated with their posts, while content posted by boys is more relaxed and comedy related. Their online/offline communities or peer groups play a highly important role when it comes to the respondents' gender identity presentation and identity developments as a whole (Zarghooni, 2007).

Social media provides the youth with various opportunities for self representations and performance strategies, but also takes an emotional and social toll on individuals. The youth presented these sentiments as they argue that social media could be an anxiety trigger and that they do get emotionally involved in their online activities. The types of tools for identity performance had gone through various changes even in the last couple of years as reels became popular with the rise in popularity of TikTok. Instagram also integrated reels in their platform, therefore now teens can either post photos, write text, post a story, a video or a reel. These extensive tools provide a wide room to play with one's identity within their community. Caspi & Blau (2008) postulate that social identities give the audience 'information about the social group, what is typical for that group and the expected norms it demands' (Caspi & Blau, 2008: 326). This argument also applies in the case of visual representations of identity, such as photos, as they offer a certain level of social cues in regards to interaction. The existing body of research supports the statement that visual representations offer social cues which provide the audience with a cognitive representation, even with the lack of actual physical interaction (Spears and Lea, 1992). These studies indicate that the manner in which teenagers build relationships have changed drastically and that it is necessary to study various aspects of their identity performances. This research already presented results from applying tools of both quantitative and qualitative value. Therefore, it is appropriate to also investigate the way in which youth present themselves in their photos that are posted on their Instagram or

Facebook walls. As presented, the majority of the participants use Instagram the most, but there were four that prefer Facebook and they were therefore included.

In order to provide a clear analysis of the results and to present them accordingly, this section of the research also implements a thematic analysis. This type of analysis technique is encouraged by Thomas (2017) when it comes to analyse the collected visual data. Photographs, as discussed above, are seen as insightful data in pinpointing certain research objectives, especially in the case of studies such as this book where the aim is to understand the manner and the aspects teenagers consider before posting on social media. The first step that was conducted in this research was to capture and compress the images that contained depictions of identity. A more detailed presentation of this process is given below. The collected data was imported in NVivo 12 Pro and was coded. In the *Methodological Considerations* chapter, it is mentioned that as a guide for this stage of the research the study conducted by Döring et al. (2016) and Smith and Sanderson (2015), in which they used Goffman's gender display categories, was referred to. Besides his dramaturgy theory of self-presentation, Goffman has also presented a gender display framework in his 1979 book called *Gender Advertisements.* This book presents a framework of typologies, 'nonverbal posing codes that connote the subordination of women in commercial imagery and a prominent tool for assessing visualizations of gender stereotyping in mass media' (Butkowski, 2021:1). During the time Goffman wrote his book regarding gender display in advertisements, social media was obviously not an existing aspect of society. With that said, it is important to keep in mind that the theoretical aspect offered which looks at the genderisms that are visible and traceable in traditional forms of media, can be applied in the digital format as well. Gender representation in other forms of media, or better said in commercial media, is an aspect discussed in this book in the previous chapters, where it is argued that gender norms are infiltrated through media to the masses through hegemonic practices. There is a growing body of research which has begun Goffman's (1979) gender display even in the context of social networks distributed images. Regarding studies concerning display of gender in traditional forms of media or as Butkowski (2021) calls it, commercial media, their 'findings have generally pointed to the continued prevalence of genderisms and gender stereotyping over the past four decades' (Butkowski, 2021:1). There is an abundance of studies (Lindner, 2004; Mager & Helgeson, 2011) which analysed and investigated that manner in which genderisms persist even in current

times in commercial media, and there are still significant differences in the way male and females are presented.

The nonverbal codes and traces of gender representation in commercial media used by Goffman predominantly in visual, photographic data is easily applicable in the digital content. In *Gender Advertisements* the collected data is sorted in categories of identified display of gender, such as ritualization of language used in interaction, which is identified in situations in which a female is characterised or positioned where she is seen as being child-like compared to the way males are portrayed. Meaning that, in commercial media, women are often portrayed in an appeasing detached manner, while men are presented in a more powerful and upright position. In this sense gender display is seen as being a factor which is both reflective and reinforcing of social norms when it comes to the way in which males and females are projected in visual and textual materials. Goffman sees this process within social reality, such as the ritual affirmations in regards to gender hierarchy of power which are mentioned above, as being 'the shadow and substance' (Goffman, 1979: 6). This form of viewing and understanding images has been extensively used in gender and media research in order to be able to quantify and provide a theoretical framework in providing a qualitative view on the manner in which male and females are portrayed in media. The social construction of gender is viewed by Goffman in the context of media as being devised around two central concepts. He describes these concepts as being hyper-ritualisation and commercial realism. These two concepts are used when analysing old forms of media in order to unravel any existing relationship between mediated settings and gender norms.

Goffman's gender display theoretical framework was created for the hegemonic models and structural formation of traditional forms of media, which were highly restrictive when it comes to gender playfulness and other range of normative challenging performances. With that said, researchers argued that although gender stereotypes, norms and display have been persistent even in social media settings, unlike traditional forms of media where the creative and display were controlled and monitored, the digital allows a lot more playfulness in regards to gender performance (Baker & Walsh, 2018). Even though it is still finding its space and it is still developing, social media through its settings have made it possible for marginalised groups that do not conform to the mainstream norms in regards to gender or heteronormativity to explore and perform their identities. With that said, according to the research

done by Baker and Walsh (2018), these groups that do not conform still face discrimination and harassment from others due to their lack of performance according to gender or sexual normativity. Researchers, such as van Dijck (2013) have also stated that compared to previous forms of media, social media has a pluralistic heterogeneity, mediated communication and relationship formation. In this sense, while in his work Goffman uses the concept of commercial realism to explore and identify displays of gender, researchers have argued that, in order for this theoretical framework to be able to apply itself to the digital space, it requires a slight modification of the initial concept.

Concerning this aspect Butkowski (2021) proposes 'that networked realism be utilized to study gender display in networked media, including self-photos', especially as this concept 'describes the standard that users apply when evaluating the truthfulness of content shared on platforms governed by interconnected social networks' (Butkowski, 2021:8). They go on to postulate that, when it comes to gender display and performance in social media content, there are five categories that set network realism apart from its predecessor. Those are the ability to enhance one's self performance through tools which provide access and visibility, global economic connection, ethnic authenticity, destabilisation of the image dichotomy from the private to the public and, lastly, the fact that in the digital context the users receive immediate feedback on their posts. In other words, the concept of network realism is made out of the created context presented in the youths' performance and the mainstream gendered cues which are used to communicate with the audience. The results of the focus group sessions showed that the youth are worried and they found it important to have an authentic performance which in their view concedes with the way they present themselves physically with those from their communities. Mediated self-representations are self made representations of the inner self which are presented through visual means. The digital provides the tools to the users so they can construct an ideal of who they are, personalise it to such an extent that still provides the performer a sense of authenticity. Researchers argue that (Dobson, 2015, Salisbury and Pooley, 2017) authenticity in itself is a performative act of the self and that, by practising it, the actor develops consistency of the self between the platforms they engage on.

Therefore, by using Goffman's theories of gender display and performance with the guidance of the research conducted by Döring et al., (2016) and Smith and Sanderson (2015) a set of codes were developed which aided immensely with the analysis process and the

identification of the themes. The photographs were coded with the following: youths' sex (male, female), focus of the photo (self/alone, youth with family member, youth with friend, youth with boyfriend or girlfriend), number of people in the photo (alone, group, one partner), body display (unrevealing, slightly revealing, revealing clothing), 'pose (upright, active, suggestive, overtly sexual)' touch (no touching, casual touch, feminine touch), 'size (larger than life, normal, further from view)', licensed withdrawal (withdrawing gaze and loss of control), stance (standing, sitting, lying on floor, imbalance) (Döring et al, 2016), type of shot (selfie, head shot, half body, full body, faceless portrayal) (Smith and Sanderson, 2015:348). This stage of the research focuses on how teenagers perform their gender identities on their Instagram or Facebook profile. Because of this, the photos were sampled to contain only the participant, be it alone or with others.

To be able to capture a view as a whole on the way youth present themselves in the online space, another set of codes were given to the photos that did not have the respondents present in them. These are presented in the results section. After the photos have been selected, captured and imported in NVivo the coding process ensued. This process resulted in the identification of a number of themes and groupings. Similar to the previous chapter, thematic analysis is an instrument which can productively be 'used to analyze the findings as words and photographs can be more powerful than numbers alone' (Glaw et al., 2017:4). The themes were identified from the data based on their repeating patterns throughout the whole sample (Harding, 2013). In the same mind set presented in the focus group session analysis, this stage of data analysis respects and follows the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013) in order to identify the main themes and to guide the interpretative process. Coding played a highly important role in the process of the analysis and Goffman's display of gender categories has been a much needed aid in the whole process of organising the data and identifying the main themes. Goffman's gender display and dramaturgy theory played an essential role throughout the analysis and interpretation process of this stage of the research. These aspects are given in more detail and are explored further in the next section of this chapter.

At the end of each of the focus group sessions, the youth were told again what the next and final stage of the research entailed and were asked if they still wished to continue. All of the respondents answered yes, that they would like to continue participating in the research and that they were comfortable with the researcher

analysing their social media content. They all gave their social media handles for Instagram or Facebook respectfully, but upon further investigation of their profiles it became apparent that four of the participants had no content actually posted on their walls, but rather engaged with other forms of identity performance such as posting stories. Therefore, all four were not taken into consideration for this stage any longer. Table 14, which is presented below, shows the current participants from which the photographic samples were taken. This makes the current sample from which photographic content was selected to be made out of 27 participants. It is also worth mentioning that, as the number of posts fluctuated highly, only the photos which contained the teen were taken in consideration for the thematic analysis, and only five of the most recent photos were selected. In a similar fashion, if the respondents posted the photographs in a clustered way, only the first was taken, as it is the photo the audiences first meet and the performance is judged based upon it. All of the photographs that were captured were put on a memory stick for safe keeping.

Table 14 – Photographic analysis participants' general information and social media platform

Respondent No	Pseudonym	Sex	Age	The most used social media account
1	Andrew	Male	16	Instagram
2	John	Male	15	Instagram
3	Kate	Female	18	Facebook
4	Lucy	Female	16	Instagram
5	Andy	Male	18	Facebook
6	Henry	Male	16	Instagram
7	James	Male	19	Instagram
8	Harry	Male	18	Facebook
9	Alice	Female	17	Instagram
10	Max	Male	19	Instagram
11	Kim	Female	18	Instagram
12	Jane	Female	18	Facebook
13	Alan	Male	15	Instagram
14	Jenny	Female	19	Instagram
15	Agnes	Female	19	Instagram
16	Abby	Female	19	Instagram
17	Will	Male	19	Instagram

18	Elizabeth	Female	17	Instagram
19	Linda	Female	17	Instagram
20	Mike	Male	15	Instagram
21	Gordon	Male	18	Instagram
22	Charles	Male	18	Instagram
23	Joseph	Male	18	Instagram
24	Mary	Female	19	Instagram
25	Joyce	Female	18	Instagram
26	Amy	Female	17	Instagram
27	Emma	Female	17	Instagram

In order to provide an overview of the type of content they have posted, an analysis on the categories of content they usually post was done through the help of Excel. The type of feedback they received, such as likes or comments, on these posts and what kind of content was the most appreciated, was also recorded. This was done in order to see what kind of content is encouraged by their audiences, and to see if the previous statements made regarding likes are true. In the previous stage the youth stated that girls put a considerable amount of effort in the type of content they post and that they care a lot more about the feedback (likes/comments) than the boys. The categories developed were done using the research conducted by Bell (2019) and Jimoh and Musa (2016) as guidance. This is done to capture a wider array of activities youth present in their social media content which contributed to the performance of their identity through photographs or other types of images. The images, from a theoretical point of view, are also seen as a mediated process in which users engage in order to send to their audiences certain messages about themselves. The categories of potential subjects of the posted content were introduced in the header of the Excel file and they received a value based on the frequency of their use by the participants. Each profile was physically checked and the posts were analysed and counted. In order to provide an overall presentation distributed by gender, as it aids the process of identifying any gross differences between the two, the table is presented similar to a cross tabulation between the categories and the participants' sex. The gender distribution in this section of the research is quite well balanced as there are 13 boys and 14 girls, which provides a more accurate view of the findings. The presented data was lastly collected at the end of March 2022. The following table presents the results.

Table 15 – Categories of photographs created and posted by the participants

Subject Category	**Male**	**Female**
Food and Drinks: coffee, tea, soft drinks, desserts, snacks etc.	0	6
Selfies:Portraits, half/full body shots, photos taken by the self.	78	317
Animals: Pets and wild animals	3	6
Scenery and art: Natural landscapes, urban/suburban settings, countryside, original artwork and artwork made by others	31	89
Photos with others: family, friends, boyfriends/girlfriends, groups etc.	45	95
Special events: Birthdays, graduation, family outings, weddings, school dances, holidays etc.	1	5
Hobbies: Sport, theatre, musical instruments etc.	12	6
Embedded text: quotes, jokes, memes, books, written notes etc.	3	74
Total	173	598

Another aspect that needs to be mentioned before presenting and discussing the findings from Table 15 is that categories that look at food and drinks, embedded text and scenery have been selected only in case the youth was not present in the shot. Meaning that, it is referred to those categories that simply state the different types of subject matter the youth chose to present on their wall as part of their identity performance. In the case of food and drink, for example, the reason why boys appear that they do not have any photos in this category is due to the fact that, in all of the photos which involve a beverage, they use it as a prop in their self performance, rather than a stand alone photographic subject. This short of use of beverages is also present in the type of content girls create as well, but unlike boys, they also have photos of beverages, books and flowers as stand alone shots. Another difference in posts concerning the food and drink category is the depiction of alcohol and tobacco use. The collected data showed that boys tend to use different types of alcoholic beverages (cocktails, beer etc) in a very dramatic (loss of control) and engaging manner.

A similar depiction is also identified with smoking, or the depiction of tobacco cigarettes which are used in a forefront, part of their identity performance. This aspect was not identified in the current female sample. In the case of girls, if they smoke and choose to present that factor, it is done in a more subtle and diffuse manner. Concerning this factor, a good example is the content posted by Emma (age 17) which presents the fact that she is smoking by either posting a faceless photo of an ashtray next to her sunglasses simply placed on a restaurant table, or by using editing tools in which you can only see a diffused black outline of her holding the cigarette. In a homogenous fashion she also depicts her

alcohol consumption. She posted a photo that is presented as being oversaturated in which there is a polaroid of her holding a glass of wine. In all of the photos posted by the girls that involve food or drink, if it is something that is socially considered appropriate such as coffee, cakes, soft drinks and so on, they are held and used freely as props in their process of performance, but, in case of alcohol or cigarette use, it is either not presented at all or in a very diffused or even slightly hidden manner. An example of this is Joyce (age 18) who has a photo of her by the seaside holding a concealed glass with a straw in it, leaving it to the audiences' imagination as to what its contents are. Even the description of the photo, "it's ok to break the rules sometimes," might lead the audience to imply that she is depicting something that is socially conflicting. In this regard, boys post freely with props such as cigarettes and alcohol. Will (age 18) has several photos in which he is looking at the camera while he is in the process of smoking a cigarette. This is also done by Henry (age 16) as he poses while smoking in a semi dark room with only half his face and the lit up cigarette being visible. Similarly, depictions of alcohol are also presented in the forefront. Andrew (age 16) looks directly at a camera while holding a colourful drink in his hand and Charles (age 18) is holding a beer while dancing.

An aspect which stands out in the table presented above is the fact that there is overwhelmingly more content created and posted by girls than boys in the existing sample. This was also uncovered in the previous two research stages in which both the questionnaire results and the focus group sessions showed that girls are considered, and apparently are, more active in the content creation and posting process. This was justified during the previous stages as being due to the need of receiving praise or external validation and the likes and comments take on almost a monetary value for acceptance, recognition and praise of the actor which presented their performance. Previously, a lack of a reaction in accordance with the expectation of the actor, was presented as being an issue of courtesy and any lacklustre reaction form the public will lead to the removal of said performance from the online space and a re-evaluation of the performance begins to be considered backstage. Meaning that the photos that do not receive the desired appreciation and praise from the public are deleted and the type of performance the actor is creating in the online space is being reconsidered and reflected upon. Even though girls are presented to be the ones more affected and involved in the online environment, the manner in which they present themselves, the numbers, as well as the way the content that boys post is presented, indicates that it

also holds value for them as well. While not as active from an average perspective – as there are some male respondents who are more active than some female respondents – they do put in effort and consideration in the way their photos look and the message they send. The desire of depicting an illusion of authenticity to the audience is present in both sexes. It is also noticeable that out of all the available subjects, selfies are the most preferred by both boys and girls.

This could suggest that the individual, regardless of their sex, sets themselves at the centre of their social media settings and perform their multiple versions of self through different displays of the body, using gender stereotypical poses and utilising different physical life settings as background. A more detailed exploration of the type of body and gender display the youth engage with are further explored and presented in the next section, where the main themes extracted from the NVivo analysis are presented. These elements are employed in order to present the online viewer with what the actor is doing, about what they concern themselves with in the physical setting. This could be intended to imply that the actor is outgoing and is socially involved in a plethora of matters. The majority of selfies are usually done outdoors and the performer usually has some sort of natural, urban or suburban setting as a background that attracts the audience's eye. If the background is reflective of a nature setting, the majority either have some sort of woods behind or in front of them with different meteorological elements being involved such as snow, rain or highly sunny weather. Another type of natural background that is highly used by the respondents is that of the sea side during different times of the day.

Concerning the different types of backgrounds the users use in their selfies, the diversity can be easily observed in the content posted by John (age 15) and those posted by Andrew (age 16). The two youths are quite opposites in their preference as John tends to post photos of him being positioned in the back alleys of apartment buildings, with cars in the frame and other elements which would suggest an urban setting. The clothing choices between the two are also starkly contradictory as John prefers to pose in hoodies and sweats, while Andrew centres his posts around formal events in which he wears a suit and tie or in natural open settings such as the mountain side during winter. This shows that differences of identity performance and gender display might occur even in the same sex category as the types of identities youth choose to portray in the online vary regardless of gender norms. These differences in background and clothing preferences are also noticeable in girls. Linda (age 17) sets more of her

selfies indoors and sets them at an angle which offers very little to the viewer as to the type of room or environment she is in, while also balancing them with natural and urban settings. Linda has some background choices which are similar to John's in the sense that she also has some posts in which she is set in the alleys behind apartment buildings with parked cars behind her, but she also engages in formal events that vary from backgrounds filled with balloons, to 19th century European architecture while being dressed in highly formal dresses. Elisabeth (age 17) also presents her performances in a plethora of indoor and outdoor settings. When it comes to the outdoors, she uses both urban and natural settings such as sea side settings, by the pool, near a parking lot, near the school, the park and the woods. The fact that settings indicate the places the youth associate with in the physical realm and also indicate the active and frequent interaction in it, could potentially signal certain mediated messages about themselves to their audiences. This goes back to the youths' communicated desire to maintain similar identity aspects which they perform in the offline environment, or even in the online, while also curating certain details about themselves. Selfies with a diverse background are also encouraged by the audience as the photos which received the most likes and comments from the audience are this type of content. Out of the entire sample, only two responses received more likes to a photo in which they performed together as team members with other individuals such as family members or classmates.

Youths use individuals from their teams in the offline environment and introduce them to their online audiences in order to simulate a homogeneous existence in both realms. Social theorists (Leander & Frank, 2006) often place online identity performances as a combination of the personal with the social. Youth, at times, take individuals who are members of their teams in the physical environment such as close friends, boyfriend/girlfriend, classmates, family members such as brother/sister or mother and father and position them in various settings in order to provide elements of the personal in the digital versions of the self and to integrate their team in the digital space as well. The youth negotiate and manage their identities in various ways and some involve additional actors in order to solidify or to enrich their online presentation of self, as well as to better frame the narrative of self they are creating. Therefore, besides selfies, youth often engage in posting group photos of people from their community, from events they went to, vacations, sports club meetings or other outings they did with the possible intention of hinting to them belonging to a certain group or community in both the online or the

offline. By posting photos with other individuals they highlight their own team and they also strengthen their own position within their performance. Elisabeth (age 17) is an appropriate example of this, as a considerable number of photographs she has posted on her page are of her boyfriend. The majority of photos are them engaging in different types of activity and rarely are they presented statically gazing towards the camera. A clear message about their relationship is given to the audience from the moment they enter her profile as she reveals in her biography, or about me part of her page, which has 'taken' written on it with a couple emoji. Another example of this is Kate (age 18) as she is posting photos with her sisters and brother positioned in different situations and contexts. They are always depicted close to one another and smiling while engaging in an activity or getting ready for one. This is done to indicate to her audience that she has a close family bond with her siblings. It also lets the viewers know who is a part of her team and who she is associated with in real life settings.

These aspects are also identified when she also depicts the other people from her life such as her friends. She posts photos in which she and her friends engage in activities and tell the audience that they have a fast paced life. On the other hand, there are also participants such as Lucy (age 16) who creates and posts photos which only focus on her and, in order to present nuanced performances, she switches in a variety of settings between parks, natural settings, urban and so on. Overall, a considerable number of the sample employs the use of teammates in their performances, but selfies are found and used by the entire sample as a modality to create an online self.

Besides the use of other individuals and their own display of the body and gender, the youth integrate sceneries in their presentations of nature, urban or suburban settings. They also take photos of elements such as art, films, music, books and so on and they use them as tools of reflection on their own person. They seem to take photos of things they find attractive, that they like, or that they feel reflect who they are in the physical environment. This aspect was confirmed by the youth during the focus group session when the majority argued that they value authenticity and they strive to present themselves the same way they do in their offline space. The lack of context on social media proves to be a difficult aspect to achieve and it pushes teens to be very reflective of what they post and the way their appearance comes across. That anxiety might be one of the factors because of which youth prefer at times to post photos that focus on something else rather than their own bodies. Posting scenery, screenshots of films, art and other forms of

visual media is practised differently than the way backgrounds are used in selfies. This practice solely focuses on the environment, the visual material, or the object, which it aims to capture, while having the actor being completely removed from the shot. In other words, the actor switches from body display and centre focus of the content piece to the photographer that takes direct control over what is being captured and presented to the audience. In a sense, through this, the performer takes control of the narrative and presents the audience pieces of the way they see the world and things they find beautiful or interesting. Jenny (age 19) has 32 of these types of posts in which she explores various aspects of her interests without exposing her own body in the shot. She mostly focuses on natural landscapes and presents a complex variety from seaside to hikes deep inside mountains. She also has a variety of different flower species in her shots and extreme close ups of trees. In these photos she either does not appear at all or she only exposes her fingers to show a flower she found during her hikes. Emma is another respondent that had an abundance of scenery and art posts. She has the most out of the entire sample with 44 of her posts being of this type. Unlike Jenny, Emma prefers to post screenshots of movies and urban scenery. She also has some natural scenery but her focus seems to be on art and urban settings. She takes photos of buildings she finds interesting, bookshops and inside restaurants while hiding behind the camera. She also uses editing software to create artistic reproductions of her photos and approaches them often with a late 90s early 2000s stylisation. In these photos, her appearance can barely be distinguished as she creates a distortion of the entire photo.

Adolescents use other types of props such as taking photos with animals or just presenting them as the centrepiece of the photo. The consumption of animal content was mentioned several times during the focus groups and it seems that youth appreciate and enjoy them. Some of them also post with their pets or even with wild animals, like Jenny did when she took a photo of her feeding a squirrel. The majority of respondents of this sample post with their dog or cat in a similar fashion they do with their friends or family members. As table 15 shows, this aspect is not an overly popular activity employed by the current sample. The table indicates that rather than posting with animals the youth prefer to engage with and present other types of props in their photo more. One aspect that the table indicates is that the youth prefer to showcase more of what is related to their hobbies. It is paramount to mention that teens, such as Emma and Joseph, who create art as a hobby and

have many posts of that kind, have been placed in the scenery and art category due to the visual aspect of it. Youth express their hobbies in an extensive and detailed manner. They post group photos with the other members who share the same interest to indicate belonging and association. They also post photos in which they are actively engaging in the process of depicting the activity of their choosing. Meaning that, if they play a sport, the youth post photos with them during a match. Mike (age 18), for example, has several photos with him in the middle of volley matches where he and his team are too busy playing to be paying attention to the camera. Mike depicts several hobbies, not just volley, he presents his interest in theatre by posting photos with him on stage acting, singing and range shooting. In one of his photos, Mike holds his rifle and points it directly at the camera while smiling, in another he is back on stage singing or acting. The use of hobbies is intensely used by teens to show different sides of themselves and the diversity in their identity. In a similar fashion, events are also used, although more rarely. Teens post important events such as their birthdays or graduation ceremonies. Embedded texts are a technique used by youth who want to send certain messages about themselves and the way they are feeling. These last two categories are employed less by the sample but are still elements which appeared in both male and female posts. These categories show that the youth use a wide selection of elements from their physical lives and transfer them in the online in a controlled and attentively curated manner.

Overall, it can be noticed in the findings that both boys and girls adopt similar tactics of self expression and value the way they come across on social media. In order to fully capture the role gender identity plays in the way they present themselves and the manner in which they develop their content, a sample of 117 photos was selected and coded in NVivo, as it was mentioned in the introduction of this chapter. Interestingly enough, by coding each photograph as indicated, several commonalities as well as differences were shown in the overall results which led to emergence of two main themes. These are presented in the table below.

Table 16 – Themes identified in the photographic sample

Theme name	**How many times was it mentioned (across all respondents)?**
Presenting the physically attractive selves	27
Neutral poses, gendered interpretation	12
Youth culture impacts gender display	27

3.3.1. Presenting the physically attractive selves

The youths' photos were taken and set in their own individual folders and were safely stored on a memory stick together with the rest of the data. This type of storing allowed for ease of access and to have more control over the analysis process once the data was imported to NVivo. Each of the photos were coded according to the type of behaviour and performance the youth gave which made way for the identification of several themes. The first one to be identified is regarding the youth's value of appearance and their need to be perceived by those around them as interesting and attractive individuals. Even during the focus group session, the youth, girls especially, talked about how they take multiple photos and tinker around with the light and colour settings of the photo and send it to several people to get their feedback on it before they post the photo and make it public. This dedication can also be seen from their posts as they direct carefully every move, gesture, smile and gaze. Goffman's display of gender theory and coding proved to be quite effective in this process of analysis as it helped pinpoint certain differences but also similarities between girls and boys published content. During the focus groups the majority of the boys stated that they do not put much effort or thought into their posts and that they take only one or a few photos and just post it/them. Unlike their statement and interpretation of other boys and their own social media content, what was discovered in the collected photographic data tells a slightly different story. Although both girls and boys described content posted by boys as being more aloof, less scripted and curated, while girls' content was described to be overly detailed and carefully thought, the collected data shows and indicates that both sexes are highly focused and considerate about what kind of content they post and the message it transmits about them.

From the get go, both sexes showed signs that they tinkered with the colour and lighting of their photos and, in some cases, filters have been used to provide a sharper look and impact on the audience. Goffman's codes were highly utilised in the process of defining this theme, especially the ones related to body display, touch and licensed withdrawal. Concerning body display, there were a couple differences which were recognised and were providing to be quite juxtaposed between boys and girls. These were grossly related to the manner in which the youth positioned their bodies into the frame. As it was shown in the previous section, the majority of participants create and post selfies which can either have the individual alone or with various team members. Their body position

varies if there is someone else in the frame with them and if that person is someone from their family, such as a parent or an older relative, or if they are with a group, or just with friends. Usually, when posting just with friends, teenagers adopt a similar body presentation with the ones they have when they pose by themselves, but when parents or older individuals are involved they tend to adopt a simple standing position and smiling while gazing directly into the camera. When posting on their own their body presentation, the type of clothing and gesture change. The majority of girls, concerning body display and the way they position themselves within the photo, are adopting stances which are depicted, according to Goffman, as being imbalanced.

Imbalance is seen as being the manner in which the body is positioned to be, with one foot forward and one set slightly back, while the body of the person is being presented at a slight angle. This is usually accompanied by a head tilt and, rather than gazing directly at the camera, the view of the actor is also delivered at a slight angle. Some bodies are displayed in a complete angle and the body faces the camera while looking over the shoulder. This position is, for example, adopted by Linda (age 17) who, through her entire profile, shows a preference for half body shots that are presented in an imbalanced manner that present a different style of gaze and touch. In one of her photos, she is presented almost bodiless with an intense focus only on her upper body while she is gazing at the camera with her head turned to the side. Imbalance in their body display is found throughout the entire female sample. Alice (age 17) has only five posts made on her Instagram account and, in almost all of them, she is displaying her body in an imbalance format. She has one bodiless photo with the focus being more on the scenery behind her, capturing only her head and a bit of her bust, and even in this setting her head is tilted to the side. She smiles softly and gazes into the camera. The boys on the other hand rarely display body imbalance or at least not in the same manner. Boys tend to face the camera directly and stand up straight. James (age 19) posts in a similar manner in all his photos he stands up with his back straight, chin slightly pointed up, arms crossed and soft smile. Similarly, this is also practised by Max (age 19) who poses while standing up his back straight and smiles into the camera. In this sense very few participants have created content in which they exhibit any kind of loss of control. The majority of respondents either adorn a slight, soft smile or do not smile at all, therefore showing very little emotion or intensity in their posts.

Touch on the other hand and licensed withdrawal is used by the majority of teenagers from this sample. Touch is less frequent in boys, although not completely eliminated. They either keep their hands in their pockets while they stand and pose for the camera or they keep them crossed, or as James did in the above description, hold their wrist firmly, or have a prop in their hands such as a musical instrument or a beverage. They present and use their hands in a restrictive and rigid manner compared to girls. Adopting and exhibiting what Goffman calls feminin touch refers to the placement of the hand on one's face, an object or just hanging in the air in a smooth, delicate soft manner. If the boys present some rigidity in their poses and stand tall and serious, girls present delicate and imbalanced movements and soft placement of their hands. Girls almost embody movements and mannerisms specific to a ballerina or a dancer. Feminine touch is primarily used as a tool when the actors desire to enhance the performance and present an overly feminine demure. The girls in the sample used it to either touch their face with the tips of their fingers or, as Abby (age 19) does it, which is to hold both of her hands lightly in the air to gesture as if she is almost holding something. These gestures are bringing to the overall constructed content an added air of feminine energy. By doing so the audiences distinguish between the male and female photographs in a similar manner in which the teenagers did during the focus group. They see and categorise males as being strong and serious, while they see females as being beautiful and delicate specifically because the content is built in such a way that those messages are the ones being mediated.

The photos described above indicate that boys and girls have at times adopted in their content a performance of the self in which exaggeration of femininity or masculinity takes place. This is done in order to give out that the performance is in accordance with the individual perceived sex and to assume the behaviours and characteristics which are found attractive by their public. This over exaggeration of gender portrayal could also indicate a visualisation of what Goffman calls a ritualisation of subordination in the photos of the girls in this sample post. Another tool that is used in order to depict attractiveness and to display one's gender is licensed withdrawal, which refers to either loss of control or the withdrawal of one's gaze. Gaze withdrawal is often found in the content the girls posted. It is at times used in combination with both feminine touch and imbalance. Lucy (age 16) has several photos of this type in which her body is turned to the side, she looks either to the side or down, all while slightly touching her hair. Boys also engage in

techniques of gaze withdrawal but, rather than shyly looking down or longingly to the side, they appear to have their attention captivated by something else rather than their audience. These are all tools which the youth use in their process of social media content creation and performances of the self. The data collected also showed other types of behaviour which do not necessarily imply an existing gender display. These results are further discussed in the following main theme.

3.3.2. Neutral poses, gendered interpretation

The data collected indicated that, depending on the type of body display, the youth might adopt the message they send or try to send so that it would not have obvious gender implications. The youth adopted certain poses or angles in their shots which left little ground for the identification of gender display or ritualisation of subordination from either sex. The respondents adopted in some cases similar stances, types of shots, props, backgrounds, gaze and even positioning of the body (sitting, standing, lying). A popular shoot among the sample is to take a photo with their back towards the camera and facing the background. Meaning that they chose to turn their back on the audience and focus on the location where the photo is taken. Another one has the actor sit either directly on the ground or on a chair and look away from the camera or conceal their face completely. The faceless body portrayal is a tactic used by both genders and there are situations in which the poses are highly similar, if not the same. A good indication of this in the data are the photos made by Jenny (age 19) and John (age 15). In her photos Jenny simply shows half of her body, her hands are hidden as she fully turns her back on the camera and faces the natural mountain landscape. Besides her hair, her name, the rest of her content in which she does show her face there is no real indication or display of gender in that photo. The same can be said about John's photo where the only indication is his clothing. John presents a full body side shot but completely conceals his face with the hood of his hoodie.

Alan (age 15) also presents the audience with this type of content as he sits on a rock and looks at a scenic evening view of the city light in the distance, completely shielding his face and presenting only parts of his body. Gender neutral and even power poses, although they do not offer on their own any direct display of gender, as they become objects of entertainment for the gaze of the audience, they become subjected to a multitude of interpretations. Each individual, whether they are in the position of performer, or

part of the audience, has been subjected to their own socialisation process and conditioning which has a direct impact on the way they see the reality, be it physical or digital. This also has an impact on the type of meaning they associate to people based on their physical appearance, clothing style, the way they organise and frame their photos and so on. These aspects indicated that there is a possibility that even in the cases in which gender is not presented in an exaggerated manner or displayed blatantly and obviously, the audience might take the information they have been given beforehand and still apply a gender interpretation of the teenagers' performances of self.

Although the comments and the reactions that the audience had to the youths' photos was not a priority that was considered in this research, it did indicate certain aspects which present more opportunities for further research of this theme and of the manner in which audiences interpret and react to neutral performances in the social media setting. The statements that the youth made during the focus groups further solidified this argument as they have shown to provide quite a binary view in the manner in which they look at and interpret the content made by both male and female genders. This was especially highlighted in the way they interpreted the two Youtube videos where, although the female presenter is the specialised one, due to her outer appearance, it was deemed that she seems less professional. Existing research supports this train of thought as other studies have also pinpointed an existing stereotype content (Rennung et al., 2016). It can be argued that, in these situations the youth receive the feedback from their audiences and they take them and try to reflect on them backstage. These are afterwards implemented in various ways in the forefront performance, which further shows that the youth are influenced by the standards set by those around them, especially from those who are in their peer group. The next theme that arose during the analysis brings this research full circle as it takes an in depth look at the props and cultural elements that the youth use during their process of online content development.

3.3.3. Youth culture impacts gender display

There is an abundance of studies which state that during the period of youth the individual is highly influenced by their peer group and communities which they choose to be a part of. Youth culture plays a big part in the manner in which teenagers choose to display their gender and to present themselves, as they come with

their own set of rules and standards. The fulfilment of these standards and following the rules are a must in order to be fully integrated and accepted into the community. These can be dictated by the type of music one listens to, books, fashion, makeup and behaviours they can consume and have. One aspect that was elicited during the data analysis process was the fact that boys and girls presented themselves in slightly different ways although, overall, they followed the mainstream gender stereotype in the poses they perform and in the way they position themselves within the photo. Differences, as it was mentioned in the first part of the results section, were identified in the types of backgrounds they usually have in their photos. These seem to be linked to the type of youth culture and environment they are part of. Emma (age 17) for example had an overall bohemian style combined with 90s and early 2000s media and aesthetics. She takes photos of 19th century European architecture, posts photos of her holding her favourite vinyl records which involve older bands or artists from the 70s and onwards. She takes screenshots of French films and other types of media that seem to evoke her interests, and she presents a balanced presentation of both neutral and feminine display. On the other hand, Elisabeth takes photos in which she expresses a more exaggerated presentation of femininity. This is expressed through the intense use of makeup, revealing clothes and the adoption of a multitude of poses which would indicate an over presentation of femininity. Elements such as makeup, clothing, filters and other aspects which change and redefine the physical are often employed by girls in social media.

Boys follow similar behaviour patterns such as girls. They engage and use different types of fashions and styles in order to present themselves as belonging to a certain group culture. More so than girls, boys from certain youth cultures use elements such as beverages and cigarettes and other types of objects as props in their posts. Boys use these elements to indicate what social group they associate themselves with, and what are the aspects they have incorporated from that culture in their own behaviour which they perform in their online and offline front stages. Unlike in the offline environment where the youth has down time, in the online realm identity traverses from one context to another and it can depict different versions of the self within, as they are required to maintain the same subject matters in order to maintain consistency in the performance and continue to receive the praise of their peers. There are other elements uncovered during the data analysis process which turned out to be associated with youth culture and the

depiction of self in the digital space. Hobbies, or better said depiction of hobbies, are highly used by both boys and girls in their social media content. This is used to add to their depictions of self, but those hobbies are still in line and they need to match the overall presentation of the culture they have assigned themselves with. Andy (age 16) applies these tactics quite well in his posts overall. He has photos posted with people who belong in the same youth culture as him in different contexts (i.e., at an event or festival), showcases different fashion pieces attributed to that culture (i.e. black leather jacket, black jeans and t- shirts), has longer hair than other boys in this sample, poses for photos with a guitar signalling that he plays it and that is a part of his life, and makes various hand gestures when he poses.

James (age 19) presents a slightly singular presence in his posts and mostly maintains the same pose in almost all of his initial photos. From the focus groups session, it is known that James does martial arts and shooting sports. He stated that due to his social media posts a lot of boys contact him to ask how they can join. Although on Instagram he does not have photos of him doing martial arts he does do poses in which he exposes his muscle and wears shirts which reveal his body more. Rather than posting about martial arts, he does post photos of him at the shooting range. In these photos he does not face the camera but is rather focusing on his target and is poised to shoot. Girls who engage into sports also depict their activities through posts of them either playing or together with their team. Amy (age 17) does not post on her wall in an extensive manner but the posts she does have are either with herself or with groups of people from her martial arts club. Unlike James, Amy posts photos of her being active in the sport and even short videos of her doing kicks. She also adopts a sport style of clothing and rarely posts exaggerated displays of gender. Similar behaviour is also seen in Kim's (age 18) posts where she either only slightly shows her face letting the eye of the audience focus more on the background rather than on her and posts doing activities of a more scientific nature. During the focus group Kim mentioned that she is highly interested in technologies and innovations. She stated that she likes to read and focuses a lot on education. These aspects also emerge in her content as she is seen in one photo looking through a telescope towards the sky at an event.

These are artefacts which receive a symbolic value that is attributed with different meanings, depending on the culture in which they are presented in, and they receive a different interpretation by the social group depending on the youths' gender

display. This is shown by the fact that girls from the same youth culture as the boys are exposed to various levels of ritualisation of subordination and exaggerate femininity. This connects to the previous themes which have been discussed, as teens' posts are done with the motivation to receive rewards from their social circles through the form of praise, feedback and approval. Therefore, youth strive to come across as attractive for those in their social circles and in the culture they associate with, in order to fulfil their needs of self reflection, evaluation, improvement and approval. These themes and the results presented in the previous stages of the research indicate a link between them and, at the same time, provide a comprehensive complementary view of the subject matter. This aspect is further discussed in the next and final chapter of this book.

At this point it seems to be an understatement to say that social media platforms impact the manner in which teenagers use these applications as both tools and stages are used in order to define, construct, perform their identities while interacting through these mediated practices with their real life peers and family. Photography elicitation has occurred through these digital social spaces and it has allowed individuals to transfer their sense of self in the cyberweb. Meraz (2009), concerning this aspect, postulated that the online realm was 'architected by design to readily support participation, peer-to-peer conversation, collaboration, and community' making it a tool which has become heavily integrated in everyday social practices and social presentation (Meraz, 2009:682). Taking into consideration the complete perspective concerning the development of children into adolescents, and the characteristics associated with that age, it is implied that youth are looking for outside perspectives from their initial socialisation ground. The use of social media by teens is greatly recognized by social scientists as being fully driven due to the needs associated with the teens' age (Jang et al., 2016). This statement is also upheld by Davis & Weinstein (2017) and Endendijk et al. (2019) who pinpoint that youth's idealisation and presentation of selves and the type of gender norms they identify with vary greatly on the type of peer group, community and family they have and what they promote. The formation of adolescents' identities is a process which is under constant revision and edition, while analysing the feedback they received while they were performing in the front stage. This aspect is discussed at length in boyd's 2014 book where she discussed how teenagers adjust their online behaviours and identities in order to please and to be appreciated by their peer group, even at the cost of being seen as less by others who do not belong to their community.

Shane-Simpson et al., 2020 states that 'communities develop implicit agreements about how to behave, speak, dress, and even think' and that the norms which are convened set 'the expectations for gendered behavior in a society (Diekman & Goodfriend, 2006), and these expectations may replicate or change in SNSs' (Shane-Simpson, 2020:4). Being seen by academics as a generation which is digitally native implies that digital social norms and the use of digital devices has been a part of teenagers' lives from a very young age. This was also identified in this research during the focus group sessions as they showed that the teens knew about the internet from a very young age and began to use it actively at least once they started school.

The results above show that Instagram, as a social media platform especially, is highly coveted and used in all sorts of activities regarding their social interaction and identity development. Ichau et al. (2019) states in their research that Instagram is generally seen as a visual platform which allows young practitioners to capture and share their everyday activities instantaneously. Users take and edit their photographs with the help of their smartphones which makes the whole process continuous and homogenous with physical practices. Youth can access the digital space in seconds and post events and objects from what they encounter during their days. Even the data showed that many teens take photos while they were attending school or their sports club activities. After they are edited and considered appropriate the photos are posted on Instagram, but not necessarily on their wall. During this stage of the research, it became apparent that the youth post photos quite frequently, not on their wall, but rather as stories. This is done because, unlike the photos which are on their walls, stories tend to be presented more as visual messages that they want certain people to see and which disappear completely off the platform after 24 hours. Stories make performances of the self, in essence, less stressful as they are not a long term commitment, like wall posts, and they are slightly hidden and only become apparent to the audience if they choose to investigate further on the actor. The wall represents a more permanent, or at least, long term investment and it provides certain stressful feelings on the social actor as they must be very considerate and take great care on what they portray as that is the performance the audience judges.

Alhabach and Ma (2017) state that Instagram as a platform provides certain gratifications and motivators for the youth, as the platform does not offer only the opportunity to share one's photos, but also the stage for presentation and chronological evolution of

the individual, a form of entertainment and escapism and, of course, the chance for mediated social interactions. Highfield and Leaver (2016) state that because of its photo sharing and editing integrated tools, Instagram encourages their users from the get go to publish and create something which looks different from the original photo. This activity proves to be dynamic and to be shared by users as they exchange photos with each other. The data presented above, and the one from studies such as the one from Manovich (2017) shows that users, when they are engaging in content creation, take into consideration both the actual information given through the photo and its overall form. Meaning that visual content posted on social media platforms, such as Instagram and in some cases Facebook, are inclined to present and focus on 'some subjects rather than others, and are also more likely to show these subjects in particular ways in terms of composition, point of view, focus, lighting' (Manovich, 2017:53). The usual focal points of Instagram and Facebook imagery are the person who owns the account and uses it to create a digital profile of themselves, but studies indicate that there is a variety of subjects which are presented in the visual content and they are usually used as contributors and as building blocks for the user's online persona.

The subject categories might vary from respondent to respondent as they usually present specific interests, tastes, style preferences and hobbies. Although these subjects seem to have a wide range which might be difficult to capture in a manageable manner, researchers had succeeded to capture the general subject matter that might appear in individuals' photographs in several categories. Hu et al. (2014) prior research shows that the general user of social media platforms, such as Instagram, typically has their photos with a focal point set on elements such as food, landscapes, sunsets, pets, fashion, sport which are captured from a multitude of angels, with various light and colour settings. Researchers argue that these types of photographs are more likely to be present on a person's wall than photos with other subjects. In this current research, these categories also scored high as the majority of participants included some forms of material which did not involve other people in the shot. As it was mentioned in the introduction section of this chapter, this research used the research studies coordinated by Bell (2019) and Jimoh and Musa (2016) as a guide, which provided an in depth analysis of the type of subjects youth, based on their gender, choose to capture on their social media account. In Jimoh and Musa's study, they took a sample of 300 youth's Instagram profiles and they applied a similar sampling

strategy as the one used in this current research. Meaning that one of the requirements for the teenagers to be considered for the research was that they had to have the minimum of one post and for those who had more, only six were taken. During this study they uncovered that the majority of youth content could be categorised under seven subjects such as food, photos with captions in them, activities, selfies, fashion, sport and photos with friends. Their results were quite similar with the ones presented in this chapter, meaning that overall girls showed that they tend to be considerably more active in posting more than boys. In their study girls also scored more on posts about food than boys, but interestingly when it came to posting with embedded text or caption photos, as they are called in Jimoh and Musa's research, the results show that boys use this category of photography significantly more than girls. These results prove interesting for possible future investigations in the subject matter.

The study conducted by Bell (2019) presented that the users which participated in her study had posts that could be split up in twelve different categories. This was possible by creating more structure and defining the content of the photos in a more precise manner, but this also indicates that the users she had as participants had a wide range of posts with a plethora of interests. She identified the categories as being: food, holidays, selfies, animals, objects, screenshots, scenery, photos with friends or family, photos with celebrities, special occasions or events, hobbies or embedded text. Unlike the data collection tools applied in this research and the one done by Jimoh and Musa (2016) and by Hu et al (2014), she brought cards with these categories and used them during focus group sessions. This could prove to be an interesting tactic as it allows the youth to have a more practical manner in which they can categorise their content. In general, by providing an analysis in which the content the youth produced is accurately categorised, it provides the researcher and the reader with a clear presentation of the findings and in regards to one's expectation of what can be found in the field. The final result was similar in all of the research articles that were consulted and it was revealed that the majority of teens post a wide array of categories when it comes to their photos, but the one that is used the most is the selfie. The selfie is seen in this research in the same manner Bell (2019) described it by defining it as a photo of the subject, either taken by them with a smartphone, or by someone else and therefore presenting it in a portrait style. The youth can be in this photo alone or with other individuals. A finding that was uncovered in the

current research is that some youth, depending on the culture they associate with, might use alcoholic beverages or cigarettes as a stage prop in their photos. Hendriks et al. (2020) mentioned in their research that the increase in alcohol consumption, or at least the presence of alcohol in Instagram posts among teenagers, is increasing. They argue that this activity is becoming more popular because it is 'highly likely that some people in their social context are more influential in this respect than others' (Hendriks et al., 2020:2). Meaning that the social context is highly influential when it comes to this type of activity and the depiction of it in social media context. When it comes to teenagers and the way they create their selfies, Mendelson & Papacharissi (2011) stated that it is not a process which involves only capturing and afterwards posting the selfie. Rather, it involves a complex organisation in which they orchestrate how they present themselves in the photo, aim to find the most flattering angles and, in order to secure the perfect shot which gets to be shared after editing, the teen needs to take an abundance of photos. These aspects have also been identified in the findings of this research which further highlights the fact that the youth take on different hats in the process of content creation as it requires producing, organising and editing. It requires for the user to become both 'the producer taking the photo and the object of the photo (Marwick,2015), making the user both the agent and the recipient of the process of objectification' (Fox et al. 2021: 194). Fox et al. (2021) argues that, due to their essence, selfies are inherently tools which when the user engages with them, they objectify their own self. Meaning that, as they become producers of the selfie and they take their own photo, they become in this process the object of their own creation which is then set up for examination by the audience and the performer themselves. By posting the photo on social media, the teenager extends the evaluation and the experience of self objectification to the public, making it possible for the visual product to be consumed by the wider public. Instagram does not inform the users who are the individuals that consume their performances, meaning that the youth never really know who visits their wall. They can assume it is their friends, if they have a private account and are very careful about who they let in to see their online performance. Even then though, one cannot know who is watching and consuming the posted content, therefore the youth perform for an invisible audience and without a clear context (Litt, 2012). This might lead to an adoption of gender stereotypes and exaggerated gender performance as an attempt to create an image which would please the masses that adopt and uphold the main

ideological discourse when it comes to gender, and the manner in which it is presented. This aspect is heavily discussed throughout the book and it shows how complex and intrinsic it can become when it comes to the way individuals present themselves.

There is a ubiquitous act in setting stereotypes based on the norms that govern the social environment which are seen in social science as being elements that were created for cognitive usefulness. The main idea behind implementing stereotypes, and especially gender stereotypes, is because they are deemed helpful as they simplify one's experiences and expectations when they interact with others by having categories in which to set them (Taylor, Peplau, & Sears, 2003). These categories might make social interactions easier or manageable from a cognitive individualistic level, but they provide a wide array of disadvantages in exploring other multiple versions of the self and looking at others in a unilateral manner. The participants in this study have shown that, not only do they use the stereotypical views to describe the different sexes, but they also attributed them to their own public personas as they took on different poses (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020) which correlate with the commercial realism. This term, which Goffman has coined in his *Gender Advertisements* (1979) book, as mentioned above, was originally designed together with a typology of behavioural codes in order to highlight and identify instances of gender display in commercially distributed advertisements. With the developments of digital technologies and most considerably the smartphone, the photos youth create and share on their social media account began to look more and more similar with the model shots that are found in commercial media. This theory is quite popular as a theoretical framework in studies which focus on the prevalence of gender norms in social media visual content (Butkowski, 2021; Butkowski et al., 2020; Döring et al., 2016; Smith & Sanderson, 2015). This theory not only guided the analysis process but also aided in identifying a more in depth interpretation of the findings and potential challenges youth face, as they try to fulfil the norms which they try to incorporate in their performances. The results presented in this chapter fall in line with the ones present in the wider body of research and sociological literature (Rousseau, 2021; Bamman et al., 2014; Baker et al. 2019; Evens et al., 2021) and, although the subject of gender in social media is in general quite popular, the recent years have shown a re-emergence of studies regarding gender performance of youth in the digital spaces.

This stage of the research brought forward the necessity that the youth feel to have online performances which make them

appear attractive to their audience, but also to seek approval of those who are in their peer group and community. These results can be found in the research made by Evens et al. (2021) who also applied a thematic analysis on their findings stating that young women show an extra care and worry about their social media appearance. The same was uncovered by Rousseau (2021) as she sought to identify how the youth develop the self in the current social media environment. She uncovered that, if in the pre-internet era the individual had only 'traditional media exposure', in the current social context children and youth are developing and being socialised while having to navigate both 'traditional appearance media' and 'social appearance media exposure' (Rousseau, 2021:17). The youth today are faced with a highly idealised model of self presentation on social media which is pushed forward by the sociocultural models which are already set in place. This is noticeable in this research, as the youth expressed in the focus groups regarding the pressure they feel and the doubt they go through at times when it comes to self presentation and, this can also be noticed in the photos they post, as they put effort in presenting themselves in a normative manner.

The culture teenagers assign themselves to has a paramount impact on the behaviours, speech, fashion and media with which they associate. The concept of what is considered attractive in that culture is something which also impacts the manner of teenagers' self perception and self presentation. The feedback they receive from the audience, even in instances in which gender normative behaviour might not be employed, impacts future performances. This is because, as it was mentioned above, youth take the information they receive, reflect on it while they are in the back stage and adjust their future performances accordingly. Dittmar (2007) argued that what is considered to be attractive from a conceptually social and physical perspective by the masses is what is interiorised by adolescents and, therefore, they strive to attain it by applying various techniques. In the online space this is done by using the editing tools either integrated in Instagram's options, filters or other applications that are specialised on modifying photos. In her research, Dittmar (2007) brings forward the argument of the hegemonic quality of mass media as the messages transmitted regarding gender stereotypes become the norm and youth form their image, which they present in their self presentation, under the influence of the messages they receive.

During the previous section the youth indicated that they feel pressure from the constant content they consume as it further

pushes the sociocultural appearance expectations. These elements can become internalised ideals that the youth try to achieve in their own selves, as mentioned above (Rousseau & Eggermont, 2018) and, as Agnes (age 19) stated during the focus groups, they end up comparing themselves with their peers or with the content posted by influencers. An aspect that appeared in this stage of the research is that besides fashion, filters, make-up and so on, hobbies are also used as tools to enhance social attractiveness. Attractiveness is in this sense an aspect which receives and is conveyed by using symbolic values and elements. Bell (2019) uncovered similar results in their own research where she states that the 'image of an adolescent playing the guitar could be used to represent a hobby, but could also be used to attract potential romantic partners, since this behaviour was seen as attractive within the peer group' (Bell, 2019:67). This was identified in the results presented above as well. Teenagers present an array of different hobbies ranging from different forms of art to sports. The youth engaging in the hobby, or at least holding an instrument related to said activity, promotes the idea of ability and offline activity, which is perceived as being socially attractive. Branded clothing, shoes, technologies, or any other types of material goods, are seen in a similar symbolic manner as the hobbies when it comes to promoting attractiveness (Bell, 2019), but this needs to be executed in a certain manner due to the fact that, as it was pointed out by Andy (age 18) during the focus group sessions, an over exposure of brands or goods in general could come off having the opposite effect and lead to the scrutiny of the community. Possessions that are displayed during performance are usually the type which are culturally associated with the persons sex and, therefore, they have a symbolic value which reflects a number of aspects that the youth desire to transmit through their images. These are used to develop their idealised identity and online presence which serves to set them as socially and physically attractive individuals. The following chapter takes a look at all of the results collected throughout this research and offers the final thought and findings in regards to the research questions that guided this whole research.

Chapter 4

Conclusions

The popularity of studies of children and youths' experience, use and habits within the online environment has been on a rising trend since the infiltration of ICTs in everyday life and since the internet gained more and more visibility. Social scientists have been calling to attention regarding the prevalence of digital technologies in youth lives and the impact they hold on the development of their identities and interpretation of their surroundings. The internet provides both risk and opportunity, and these aspects had begun to capture a more prominent light on the vastness of the internet and its role in youth and children's lives as the SARS-Covid pandemic took hold and pushed the entire population indoors. The first few months of the pandemic saw the enforcement of lockdown policies in a lot of countries around the world. The implementations of these new regulations lead the whole population to deal with physical distancing and isolation which affected several areas of their social and mental wellbeing. The effects of isolation had been long studied in children and teenagers' development. Concerning this aspect, Laursen and Hartl (2013) stated in their research that the youth feel the effects of isolation, which are especially pronounced in teenagers and can have an impact on their identity development and transition from their child selves to that of youths.

Disrupting youths' everyday practices, by attending school physically and engaging with their peers in person proves to have developmental consequences and have an effect on teenagers' well-being in general. The inability to see one's peers in school and other in-person contexts presents a developmental mismatch that is likely to affect adolescents' mood and overall well-being (Hamilton et al., 2020). There have been several studies conducted during the outbreak of the pandemic which showed that, besides the possible consequences of the epidemic outbreak brought to the population in general, it also caused several impediments especially to teenagers' social and psychological needs. These elements had a direct impact on their identity and the manner in which it is performed. Because of the social deprivation which they experienced, especially during the first months of lockdown, the youth understandably found refuge and

compensation for the lack of physical contact in the digital space. Leisure activities which before the pandemic would have been conducted in more social environments such as sports, clubs, or going in different outdoor locations, either urban or in natural settings, have been transferred online and a multitude of platforms and digital devices have been employed in order to substitute youth needs. The period of adolescence is known as being the period in which the youth distance themselves from their parents and engage more with their peers and seek to find companionship in different communities outside their family environment.

The use of ICTs and the internet being exponentially augmented during the SARS- CoV-2 pandemic has also led to an increase of risks and opportunities youth might encounter in the digital space (Gonza□lez-Padilla & Tortolero-Blanco, 2020). Opportunities were given in the fact that, through social media platforms, the youth could still present an array of performances of the self and become part of the audience for the other members of their peer group. The youth substituted the physical environment with the digital when it came to spending time together with other people from their age group and alleviating certain feelings such as anxiety or loneliness. Studies which were conducted during this time were both looking at the overall effects of social media consumption and online presence of teenagers and they have found that, during their time on social media, the youth are encountering both protective and risk factors which impact their sense of self (Elbarazi et al., 2022; Marciano et al., 2022). As mentioned in the previous chapters of this book, the risks factors youth might stumble upon while being present online have become a great concern for the administrative bodies of the European Union (European Commission, 2021), as well as for the United Nations, as they have published Commentary 25 in the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 2021 (OHCHR, 2021). The Better Internet For Kids body of the European Commission has been fully focused on collecting data from youth and involving them in the process of policy and regulation development regarding the goal of creating a safe and opportunistic space for children and youth while they are online (Better Internet for Kids, 2022).

In their 2021 study, Livingstone and Stoilova stated that the type of risks children and youth can encounter are in accordance with the 4Cs classification. This classification is also recognised and used by the Better Internet For Kids network as well as the UN. The 4Cs classification of risks refers to the fact the harmful elements a child or young person might encounter online can be either related

to content, contact, conduct or contract. Content refers to the potential harmful or false information that minors can click on and consume. This was especially worrying during the pandemic as there was an influx of fake news and information regarding treatments which could potentially put the youth in harm's way. Contact refers to online encounters with others which could lead to harmful or illegal interactions. Performing the self online for an unknown audience can make the youth susceptible for possible communication with unknown individuals who are hiding their true identity, or are complete strangers and have improper intentions. Conduct refers to the possibility of the youth witnessing harmful and dangerous content that can cause feelings of stress or other types of emotional discomfort. Contract refers to the potential harms that could be inflicted on the youth due to the elements they agree to when they create an account on a different site, which can lead to their data being sold off or becoming victims to potential scammers. These are all elements which are impacting the way youth engage with social media platforms and the manner they choose to construct their online selves (Livingstone & Stoilova, 2021). The current international and national setting regarding digitalisation and the impact it has on the younger generation positions this research in the forefront concerning the need to further the existing knowledge about the youths' online identity development and gender identity performance. These aspects are especially impacted with the youth encountering harmful and disadvantageous reactions to their content development and shared posts from their peers. This, as mentioned in the previous section, is shown to have a direct repercussion of one's sense of self and the choices they make in the gender display process.

Because of the subject matter of this research and the objectives it was set to fulfil and insights it had to uncover, the theory of dramaturgy being set as the main paradigm of this project proved to be a wise and well taken choice. Goffman's (1959) theory indeed provided the necessary theoretical framework in order to fully analyse and interpret the findings in a holistic and comprehensive manner. Although there are plenty of more current symbolic interactionist theories that provide a more modern view on the subject, Goffman's theoretical work proved to be quite flexible and wide reaching in the epistemological tools it offers. The addition of Goffman's (1979) gender display and ritualisation of subordination in the photographic analysis stage proved to be a necessary factor in order to provide an in-depth exploration and understanding of the impact that gender identity has on the youths'

online content development process and sharing of the final result. This research looked at the way youth use, see and perform on social media platforms and how gender impacts all of those factors. The use of mix-methods also provided the support to collect data in a way which included all aspects that were questioned. The online questionnaire, although it was used only as an descriptive tool to provide both the researcher and the reader with an image of what could be found in the field when this type of subject is being inquired, it proved to provide potential answers to several initial research questions, such as what type of content are youth posting most frequently, the social media they use the most for identity performance, the type of content they consume the most while they are online and the amount of time they spend online. Being that the data collection process was done during the pandemic the result was an expected one. The focus group guide was constructed based on the results collected from the first stage of the research and the Goffman theory of dramaturgy was also used to construct the questions used in this stage. The result received from this stage complemented the ones from the first stage, while also matching them. The youth confirmed certain aspects which were identified in the questionnaire results, such as the amount of time they spend online, the social media platform they use the most, the type of content they post most often and the type of content they enjoy to consume. The final stage of the research was again built based on the data collected from the previous two and took a deep dive in the type of content the youth posted and shared on their Instagram/ Facebook accounts. With the help of Goffman's (1979) gender display theory, several aspects related to the impact gender identity has on digital content development were uncovered and presented. All three stages complimented each other and added new information to the next one. Together they proved to provide the required research tools to collect and analyse the findings. In this chapter several factors are offered as a final discussion and conclusion of the whole research project and book. The next section provides the answers that were identified during the research to the questions listed in the Introduction chapter of the book and, in the final section, there are the limitations identified in this study as well as the future research proposition regarding this subject.

Contributions to the field

This section provides an overall summary of the findings detailed in the previous chapter. In order to show what answers were uncovered for each of the questions presented in the first

chapter of this book, each of those questions are detailed and the answer is placed underneath them. As it was mentioned in the final section of each chapter with the relevant references, the results from this research fall in line and correspond with the existing findings in the field. This could have several implications, such as the fact that the main gender norms and ideological factors have achieved a somewhat homogeneous performance, at least at European and American level, due to the globalisation and prevalence of them in both traditional and social media (Rousseau, 2021). Another is that these norms are obtained by the youth through the process of socialisation and social conditioning. It is also worth mentioning that there might be a possibility that teenagers who grow up in communities which uphold more traditional and religious values, might provide an interpretation and performance which reflect that upbringing.

What are the motivators for teenagers to engage in online activity? Within the first stage of the research, the youth were given the option of multiple choice and were asked to choose from the items available to them on what could be the main motivation for them to construct an online presence and to go online frequently. To this, the majority of respondents, meaning 90.6% of cases, stated that the main motivation for them to go online is to communicate with friends. These results, as it was stated above in the previous section, show that one of the most important factors which defines the age of adolescence is their need to keep in contact and up to date with their friends and peer group. As this data was collected during the pandemic, the need for peer connectivity and communication with friends has greatly increased. These aspects were also reinforced by the youth during the focus group sessions in which the majority also stated that they mostly use social media platforms such as Instagram/Facebook in order to keep in touch with what their friends, family and peers are doing and to communicate with them. The youth argued that because of the pandemic that was the only way they could communicate with those outside their home.

How do teenagers feel about new media regarding representation?

The results that aid to provide an answer to this question are presented fully in chapter 5 where the focus group results are analysed and interpreted. The youth gave answers which, in general, show a traditional normative view of gender and the type of behaviour they see and describe in others. Meaning that, the youth

see and describe digital content made by boys and girls in regards to the representations in gender display in order to be traditional, and they used words that could reflect passivity when referring to girls, and words that reflect activity when referring to boys. When asked about the two YouTube clips and which of the two clips they find reliable enough to use as reference for a project or an essay, the majority of the participants responded that if they have to choose only one video, then they would use the one made by the man. These results also are found in the existing body of research regarding the manner in which male and females within the current ideological system tend to see representations of men and women.

What social media platforms do they use and how much time do they spend on them?

The results collected in the first two stages of the research show that the majority of youth have a Facebook account, followed closely by those who have an Instagram. The majority of youth who have an Instagram also have a Facebook account, but when asked which of the two is their main platform on which they perform their sense of self and construct their online identity, the majority answered Instagram (56.7%). When it came to how much time teenagers spend on these sites on a daily basis, 52.4% answered that they spend around 3 or more hours. These results were also confirmed during the focus group discussions and the youth confirmed that because of the pandemic they probably spend most of their time online.

What gender differences can be observed in regards to new media consumption?

To give a short summary of the results in the first stage, the differences in regard to new media consumption appeared in categories which are traditionally associated with a certain gender, such as fashion in which a big percentage of the female participants and a more modest number of male participants chose it, the same situation was found in regards to gaming were boys score more than girls. During the focus group sessions, what came up was that both girls and boys use the online environment for education, and that the focus of the subject is where the difference is noticed. Boys chose specific educational subjects and stand-up comedy. Girls also chose these but they also added the fact that they follow content related to lifestyle and morning routines. This could imply that the girls in this sample are highly concerned with self development and growth. A more detailed answer regarding this question is given in

chapter 4 in subsection *4.2.6 Online content consumption* or in chapter 5 under the subtheme *Interests are not gendered.*

What difference can be observed in online activity behaviours between males and females?

During the focus group sessions, the youth argued that the biggest differences between boys and girls is that boys are more relaxed when it comes to their online content production, they post more impulsively and post rarely compared to girls. Girls are presented as being in opposition to boys' online activity. Meaning that girls are seen to be very careful and thoughtful about their content, give more attention to details and post considerably more than boys. During the photographic analysis some of these aspects were shown to have validity. Boys' posts are considerably fewer than girls' posts. Although the majority of boys said that they are not careful or care about the content they post, their actual posts showed that they do put effort in the way they appear, although not to the extent girls do.

How do they feel about their gender identity when it comes to fitting in with their peer group?

Teenagers have shown to be highly aware of the opinions and reactions of those who are their audiences and members of their peer group. During the focus groups, girls especially have stated that the process of posting online can be stressful and that they take multiple photos, edit them and ask the opinion of several people from their peer group what they think about the photo before they post it. Some of the boys stated a similar process as the girls, while others stated that they just check to appear decent. Both sexes showed that the opinion of their peer group regarding online performance of the self is important and can cause feelings such as anxiety.

How does gender identity influence digital content production?

In their research, Döring et al. (2016) stated that the content posted by users on social media platforms 'does not automatically lead to a reduction in stereotypical gender portrayal as was clearly demonstrated by the presented content analysis of Instagram selfies' (Döring et al., 2016:961). This can also be said about the existing findings. The youth use the gender norms which have been used in their socialisation process, and they disseminate them in the online environment. This aspect is seen especially in the analysis of their photographic content, in which Goffman's theory of

gender displays, as well as his theory of dramaturgy were used to analyse and interpret the data. The youth showed an array of traditional forms of gender display which are traditionally used in commercial media. To give a short summary regarding this question, the youth's gender identity is highly influenced by the gender norms that are upheld by their community and peer group, and they use these guides to help them construct their online identities and performances. The youth value that they come across as attractive to their peers and that they fit in with the standards.

To conclude the results sections of this book, it can be said that even when it comes to online identity performance and the impact gender has on that process, the whole process of identity construction 'is an inherently social process; identities are constructed through psychological understandings of interactions with others' (Bell, 2019:65). Considering the results presented above and the paradigm that was adopted throughout this research it might not be fully inappropriate to theorise that in adolescence, as youth become more aware of the social environment they reside in, and of the social consequences and rules of that place, they become hyper aware and put effort while residing in the backstage. This is done to ensure that while they perform in the front stage, they do not misstep in such a manner that will affect their social standing. Goffman's theory of dramaturgy pinpointed the fact that individuals, even when it comes to gender behaviours, will integrate certain expected behaviours in their performance, even though they might not fully associate with those elements while they are back stage. The fear of alienation and of not fitting in seems to have filtered even in the online environment where, in order to keep up to speed with friends and colleagues, the youth adopt poses that are expected of their gender and try to perform a role that is accepted by both online and offline audiences. This research provided data that helps to draw a better view on the manner in which gender impacts the youth's online performance on social media, but even though answers to the research questions were provided, there is still a need for a more in depth exploration of the subject. This research does have its own limitations and does have potential for future projects. The next and final subchapter provides a presentation of these two factors in a more detailed fashion.

Limitations and directions for future research

Although this study provides a set of significant results, as with any existing piece of research, it comes with its own set of limitations which need to be considered for future research

regarding this subject. The identified limitations have been laid out below:

A first limitation which should be considered, and has been mentioned throughout the previous chapters, was the underwhelming presence of males in the first stage of the research, providing an unequal gender representation of the genders. Similar aspects can be said about the age as well, as there was an imbalance in regards to the age distribution.

A second limitation which was identified is that the sample who participated in this study were youth from stable income families and they all attended high school in the main city of the counties they lived in. This implied that the youth had overall better access to opportunities and resources. Results might differ if the data would be collected in less economically developed areas or from disadvantaged groups.

A third limitation which was uncovered within this research is the fact that these results reflect data only from a limited number of social media platforms regarding self expression and performance online. Meaning that, the data collection and analysis was mostly done with social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook in mind. This was due to the results collected in the first stage of the research. Therefore, for the study of other platforms, these elements should be considered.

As the research reached its end, a fact that seemed almost palpable regarding future research opportunities concerning this topic would be to have a follow up individual interview session with the respondents, in order to provide a better understanding of any possible differences between their public and their private gender identities or, better said, gender norms they believe and associate with. This would give the researcher the opportunity to see and pinpoint any differences in the way youth choose to conduct themselves between the front and backstage as well as show more clearly to what extent the youth are influenced by their social environment. Using their social media posted photos as a tool in the process of data collection, would also help the research to better comprehend what elements of gender do the youth fully associate with and which are portrayed for the audience.

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